

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

**Christmas 1**  
**December 26, 2004**  
**Fr. Bill McGinty**

**“The Beauty of the Gospel”**

From time to time we pick up the newspaper and read an article that tends to irate us and make us grind our teeth. Such an article appeared in the Times Herald Record last Friday and was entitled “The Story of Christmas is open to some interpretation.” The gist of the article was that the Bethlehem story so many Christians believe in is historically untrue. I knew before I read the article that it would annoy me intensely. Articles about religion written in the secular press by writers with no theological training always manage to annoy me greatly. Usually their theology is so bad that I take to mentally correcting their English grammar, as if their bad English compensates for their stupidity. Recently, a friend of mine in the newspaper business told me that they deliberately write this stuff to con the rest of us into responding. Apparently, polemic and knee jerk reactions make for good copy.

Luke and Matthew’s Nativity narratives are quoted liberally in the article. No where does the author mention that both narratives were probably added to the Gospel at a later date nor that they have their Genesis in an older Christian tradition, more likely the early communities before the Gospels were written down.

Yet, the more important fact that the writer missed is that the Gospels are not biographies, nor are they histories. They are a witness to the death of Jesus and they are a study of his teaching. The Gospels are theologies and are unique as a genre.

The truth of Jesus is the witness of the early church and the enduring right of his message. If the author had done the tiniest piece of research himself he would have discovered that Christians have not believed Jesus was born 2004 years ago for about 80 years now. Christians do believe Jesus was born between 7 and 4 BC.

The birth narrative stories are wonderful stories, not because of their history, but because of the deep symbolism and meaning they contain. The author wants to explain away dreams, angels, and wisemen as a fabrication or somehow just untrue.

To do so is to miss the whole point of a religious story. There is a language going on in these stories, a hidden message, which makes them more than a mere narrative.

Search the Old Testament and dreams and dreamers appear in abundance. Each time they do, you know that God is speaking and his plan is unfolding.

From Abraham to Joseph dreams have enormous significance. They not only tell of God’s revelation, but they point ahead to the future.

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So, too, with the mention of angels. Jews reading or listening to these stories are immediately reminded of Jacob and his encounters with angels. Angels on ascending and descending stairs to heaven are praising God and singing alleluias.

Yet the word angel always denotes a message or revelation of God. Why be surprised that the New Testament writers use the same language? When it comes to the wisemen, it makes little difference whether the story is literally true or not. The story expresses a greater truth that the wisdom of the Old Testament testifies to: the birth of a Messiah.

Matthew mentions the East because wisdom was regarded as originating in the East. The Magi bring Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. If the story was meant to be literal truth, how stupid would that be? Every mother would tell you that what are needed are diapers, Johnson's baby powder and powdered milk, and lots of it. Gold is useless, cash would be welcomed. But Frankincense and Myrrh, no practical use what so ever. The writer clearly had a different intent and a different message.

Gold was the symbol of Kingship, the gift to give a King. Frankincense is spice to worship God with. Myrrh is an ointment to prepare a body for burial. With these three words the Gospel writer told his audience that Jesus was a King, the Son of God, who would die that all might live.

Now you know why reporters writing religious stories irritate me. They seem to believe that all stories are the same, true or false, right or wrong. That would be like trying to condemn "Alice in Wonderland" for not been historical. There are different kinds of writings; some just need to be accompanied by a brain.

The beauty of the Gospel stories is the beauty of a tapestry that has so many threads that come together and tell a story of deep meaning of God's intervention in our lives. Chop the story up into little pieces and it may well not make sense, but see it in its entirety as the collective witness of those early Christian communities, then it has enormous appeal and power. To use another analogy you can take the French horns out of an orchestra and listen to the part they play. Their music often doesn't make sense. Somewhere there is a melody line missing. Put them back into the Symphony with all the other instruments and their music makes perfect sense.

The wonder of the Gospel lies in the fact that they are interactive. They invite us to read, listen and absorb the word of God. But they will not leave us there. The Gospel word forces us to act. To take the teachings of Jesus and do something with it: feed the poor, visit the prison, and cure the sick. That is why we Christians call it the "Living Gospel." It is this interactive part that we do not write down, in a sense it is the rest of the orchestra, and our response to the Gospel is the symphony.

When it comes to the Nativity story there is a huge unwritten living Gospel that no historian, and certainly no 50 cent newspaper reporter has access to. It is that we Christians see and read in this simple story the completion of so many dreams, prophecies and hopes from Abraham to John the Baptist. They are realized, not by Kings, Generals,

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Armies or Empires, but by the beauty of a young girl saying yes to her God. And the truth of honest folk who stood up and believed. The unwritten Gospel says that we Christians will take the message of the Christmas story into our New Year, and with it we will offer shelter to the homeless, give our gold to the poor, and we will worship with everyone no matter how diverse. We will bind up the wounds of the sick with the myrrh of Christ's love.

Write about that in your newspaper Mr. Reporter. It is what Christians have been doing for 2000 and eight years, but whose counting?

Let up pray:

Lord you chose to be born in a stable. Give us that sense of wonder in your story that we, too, may live our lives poor in spirit, rich in the living Gospel of your love.

Amen +