

Testimony

A Pamphlet from Pax Christi San Antonio

Anticipating December 25, 2018

Pax Christi San Antonio does not solicit donations. Thoughtful comments, however, may be sent to the editor at j6anthonyblasi@yahoo.com, with the understanding that permission to publish them is implied. Pax Christi International was founded in 1945 with the encouragement of Bishop Pierre Marie Théas of Montauban, France, by Marthe Dortel Claudot, as a Christian lay organization dedicated to preventing a repetition of the savagery of the twentieth century's world wars.

Editorial

The Lectionary presents four different pairs of liturgical readings for the Solemnity of the Nativity; so there are four-fold sets of *Second Reading* and *Third Reading* sections. Tom Keene's poem is For more of Tom's poems, see <http://www.tomkeeneandthemuse.com/index.php>.

Second Reading

Vigil Mass Acts 13:16-17, 22-25)

The Acts of the Apostles tells of Paul arriving in a city named Pisidian Antioch and going to a meeting of the synagogue. He is asked to speak, and he gives a brief history of the Hebrew nations, up to the time of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. In this part of the speech that Luke attributed to him, Paul was intent upon the Jews of the synagogue knowing that Jesus was one of them, just as today we need to recognize that he was a human and a member of a nation, as are we.

Mass during the Night (Titus 2:11-14)

"For the grace of the savior God appeared to all people, instructing us so that, rejecting the impiety and worldly passions of humanity, we may also live in the present age with justice and piety..." Thus begins a very brief reading. It is clearly a statement of generic Christianity, part of which is living "with justice" as well as piety.

Mass at Dawn (Titus 3:4-7)

According to this reading, Christians are not people who are "just" and by virtue of that are saved but are people made just by the gift of mercy and by virtue of that action have hope. The author of the Pastoral Epistles, from which this reading is taken, says that it is a reliable statement, but that Christians should be concerned about good works. Having hope from the Messiah does not imply that how one acts or does not act in this life is inconsequential.

Mass during the Day (Hebrews 1:1-6)

The reading consists of the opening of the *Letter to the Hebrews*: "In the past God spoke to the patriarchs through the prophets in many ways and in many places. In the last of these days He has spoken to us through a son, whom He designated heir of everything, through whom He also made the ages. Being a reflection of The Glory and

an impression of His nature, and bringing forth all things by the articulation of His power, and having been made a purification for sins, the Son sat to the right of the Majesty on High.” This is a very early statement of the Christian creed that resonates with a much later statement in the Prologue to the *Johannine Gospel*. Jesus of Nazareth, who lived without holding office or commanding armies, was “a reflection of the glory” and an “impression” of the nature of the Creator. It is all about a different kind of glory and force-of-nature.

Third Reading

Vigil Mass (Matthew 1.1-25)

The third reading for the vigil mass is Chapter One of the Gospel of Matthew, much of it consisting of a genealogy: “Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob....” The *Lectioary* provides the option of skipping the genealogy and taking up the narrative at verse 18: “And the birth of Jesus the Messiah was thus....” But the genealogy is actually quite interesting, going back only as far as Abraham, not all the way to Adam, and following a lineage through David. It concludes, “...Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom Jesus, called the Messiah, was born.”

Why did Matthew emphasize the lineage from Abraham to Joseph? Jesus, after all, was “begotten by the holy spirit” (verse 20). One reason would be that Abraham is the father in the Faith, even today recognized by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Joseph carries the tradition of the faith up to the time of the Messiah. It is not particularly important who one’s biological ancestors were but whose historical faith one has.

It is well known that Matthew’s gospel is grounded in Jewish tradition, but it clearly broke with any tribalism. Jesus was begotten from outside the tribe, and Matthew belies no interest in the ancestry of Mary. The tradition of Matthew’s nation—and Joseph’s—leads outside the nation to a peoplehood that included that nation, for sure, but was not limited to it, not morally imprisoned in a tribe. The implication is that faith should not be used to define a tribe.

Mass during the Night (Luke 2.1-14)

Caesar Augustus wanted all the wealth in his “world” registered for “taxation”—not taxing for public purposes as in modern governance but for the private margin that went to the Caesar household. Mr. Octavian Caesar’s governor of the region, Quirinius, took an inventory of the properties of the deposed Herodian operative, Archelaus, in 6-7 CE. Writing about eighty years later, Luke was evidently mistaken about the dates of the birth of Jesus and of the inventory. Luke was therefore also mistaken about the reason Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem. Joseph may well have had a share in some income property near Bethlehem, perhaps occupied by relatives or renters, and he had to register that for taxation. There was no room where the people lodged on the property (translations that speak of a commercial inn read too much into the Greek). The suggestion is that while Caesar Augustus and his governor are tallying up properties to be taxed, Joseph’s property near Bethlehem was so modest that he and

Mary had to spend the night where the animals were kept, and when Jesus was born they had to place him in a feed bin.

Having set the contrast, Luke provides a chorus to comment on the narrative, a host of God's messengers, saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom He is pleased." Somehow, translators have missed the point! With whom is God pleased? Caesars and governors, or commoners so poor that they have to tend their animals in the open country and make do with an animal shelter when travelling?

Mass at Dawn (Luke 2.15-20)

The shepherds seek out Mary, Joseph, and the newborn, and after seeing them they returned to their flocks, all the while praising God over what they heard. And Mary tried to understand in her heart what the shepherds had said—that a messenger of God told of a savior being born for them and lying in a feed bin. According to Luke's narrative, Mary had some sense that something momentous was happening: "...Because He looked upon the lowliness of His handmaid / For behold all generations will bless me from now / Because the Mighty wrought great things for me...." But what did it mean, when they had to stay with the animals and lay the child in a feed bin?

Mass during the Day (John 1.1-18)

This is the well-known Prologue to the Johannine (or Fourth) Gospel. Side notes linking the text to the tradition of John the Baptist have come to be interpolated into the text itself, thereby obscuring what the author was originally saying. Moreover, using the word *beginning* to translate the opening words obscures an allusion to the Greek translation of the opening of Genesis, and while using the term *Word* links the passage to the Logos Theology of the Wisdom books of the Bible, it obscures the fact that the Word is presented as spoken *to* God, thereby making a reference to a conversation within God. The passage anticipates Trinitarian theology in a remarkable way. Hence:

"In Genesis there was speaking, and the speaking was to God, and the speech was God. This was to God in the beginning. Through him (i.e. through the speech—AB) all things came to be, and apart from him nothing came to be that has come about. In him was life, and the life was people's light. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

"...He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, and the world did not know him. He came into his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to those who accepted him he gave the ability to become children of God—to those believing in his name—those who were born not from blood, from the will of flesh, or from the will of a man, but from God. And the speech became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, glory as the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. ...For we all received from his fullness one gift in place of another. For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came about through Jesus, the Messiah."

In the commercial carnival of seasonal merchandising and the righteous violence that is oblivious of sacred seasons, the world still does not know or accept him.

Poem

What Was Christmas Like?

Anthony J. Blasi

Christmas takes a Palestinian Nativity legend as rephrased in first century Greek, grafted into a pagan calendar, to be recalled in a winter festival, only to survive as an isolated pang of conscience amidst a cacophony of commercial hype. How can we get the point? When the once quaint image of a newborn set in a feed bin, without the shelter of a real home, is transformed in the age of electricity into a contest of gaudy displays of flashing extravagance, how can the point not be lost? How can the gifted humility of the original epiphany be reconciled with the gilded conceit of Christmas as we know it?

Do we dare return to the beginning as best we can? Herod “the Great” was in charge. He was not elected, not even by a constitutional quirk such as our Electoral College by which a minority can overrule a majority. He was rewarded with local power by a foreign empire to which he was subservient. The state treasury and legal system were not separate from Herod’s person and whim. He built cities in the imperial style, centers of luxury for himself and his associates. He assessed funds from land owners, ultimately taken from the earnings of tenant farmers, in order to fund his lifestyle and to pay tribute to the foreign emperor.

Galilee was a sparsely settled frontier between the Greek and Judean worlds. Its early settlers had come a generation or two beforehand, from Judea. Judea had been experiencing “population pressure”—a term of art meaning the orchards, vineyards, and sheep ranches could not support all the people who depended on them. Joseph, of Judean descent, was a construction contractor; the suggestion that he was a “carpenter” is a mistranslation. Palestinian architecture featured masonry and thatched roofs, not wooden frame houses. Joseph assembled work crews to help construct Herod’s cities and palaces, and Herod’s personal agents were known to pocket the construction funds and pay contractors less than was owed. Herod favored his agents over their victims if any dispute were to be ventured; that was how the system operated.

The evangelist Matthew conveyed the oppressiveness of the system with his story of Herod hearing of a newly born rival king and a subsequent decree that children were to be slain. The evangelist Luke conveyed the same message by associating the Nativity narrative with the financial assessments imposed by the empire—a “census” was an inventory of properties for assessment purposes, not a count of people. An actual grand assessment was in fact carried out by the empire, but it was some years after the time Jesus was born; Herod “the Great” had died and the finances needed to be restructured to accommodate the new reigns of his “un-great” heirs. Decades later, Luke used the hearsay about the great “census” to characterize how conditions were when Jesus came into the world.

Joseph and Mary may well have left Nazareth in Galilee and gone to Bethlehem in Judea. They were Judeans by descent; Joseph would have inherited a share of a plot of land once owned by his ancestors. After the harvests were in, landlords, however

modes their holdings, visited their properties to collect what was owned them from the proceeds. The dwellings on the lands were occupied by the tenants (or perhaps cousins); so Joseph and Mary would make do with wherever the animals were kept in the cold season. Again, translators have done us a disservice by giving us the impression of an “inn” rather than a dwelling. In any event, Joseph owed the taxes on his share of a Judean plot of land, and he evidently paid off what he owed to Herod “the Great” by organizing work crews to build one of Herod’s palaces or cities. In such cases, small time rental income was not so much a benefit as a burden.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled to Egypt. Just as the birth of Jesus in a Bethlehem stable and his being set in a feed bin was something of an embarrassment to the early Christians, which Luke had to explain, so also Matthew had to explain the embarrassing presence of Jesus’s childhood family as refugees from the law, in Alexandria (in all likelihood). Jesus was to be a Christ, a Messiah, with a divine kingdom, but his first moments were in an animals’ food trough and he was a refugee from the law during his childhood. Something had gone wrong for Joseph in the Herodian system of oppression. Even the mere death of the great Herod would require service to a new un-great Herod in Judea rather than to a different un-great Herod in Galilee. Rival oppressors are not known for making allowances to benefit the oppressed.

What message did the child Jesus take from this? His family, including stepbrother and stepsisters, went back to Nazareth of Galilee, knowing the life of aliens and refugees, knowing the dangers inherent in being swept into systems of injustice. One doubts that he would be waiting for a Santa Claus.

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