

A Sermon Preached by the Bishop of Newcastle at Christmas Midnight Mass Christ Church Cathedral 2011, Luke 2: 1-8

May I first of all wish you and yours a joyous and holy Christmas? It is wonderful that you have come to the Cathedral to join in the celebration of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to talk about the settings for Christmas - the setting in this Cathedral, in the Gospel of Luke whose Christmas story we've just heard, and the setting of Christmas in Australia.

This Cathedral has a beautiful holiness of space that contributes to our experience of the wonder and grandeur of God. The Crib that I blessed during the Entrance Procession will captivate all of us, especially children. At the conclusion of Midnight Mass, you are invited to visit the Crib and glimpse something of the portrait that Saint Luke developed in the Gospel Reading tonight.

It was Saint Francis of Assisi who introduced in 1293 the Christmas Crib into popular Christmas devotion. St. Francis' idea of bringing Bethlehem into one's own town spread quickly all over the Christian world, and soon there were Christmas cribs in churches and homes. We have the crib replicated at the High Altar of the Cathedral.

Doubtless a crib scene has featured on many of the Christmas cards you have received and you may have set up a nativity scene in your home. What is so universal now in our Christmas celebrations, the crib that recreates the setting of Jesus' birth, was an innovation by Saint Francis of Assisi.

The significance of setting is not lost on Newcastle's own crime writer, Barry Maitland, a former Professor of Architecture at Newcastle University. In a recent review of his latest novel that features his two principal London detectives David Brock and Kathy Kolla, the reviewer in the Sydney Sun-Herald noted that Maitland accomplishes the feat of making 'the setting become one of the characters'.

The reviewer of Maitland's latest crime fiction Chelsea Mansions wrote

The Chelsea Mansions Hotel, where the murdered woman and her companion were staying and which holds the key to solving the mystery, maintains a suitably sinister and brooding presence throughout the narrative.¹

You may also have experienced in watching a movie or reading a novel the setting becoming a character that you sense influencing you and the characters in the film or the novel. It is as if the setting has its own voice. And this voice is layered behind whatever the living characters speak.

This technique is present in the nativity narrative of Jesus in Saint Luke's Gospel.

In the nativity narrative, Saint Luke like Barry Maitland achieves the power of place - the setting becomes one of the characters in Luke's narrative. This setting is more than the romantic level that we receive, when we glance at Luke's text or look at a crib.

For Luke brings together pieces from the very long history of God's People, Israel, that have been very significant and meaningful in their understanding of God. Luke emphasises these pieces of revelation about God in his description of the nativity setting.

This meshing of earlier aspects of Israel's history and Israel's relationship with God forecasts who Jesus is, what Jesus will accomplish and has also within it an anticipation of Jesus' final days. The

¹ Christine Cremen. Setting is the scene-stealer in *Books Extra* in The Sun-Herald, December 11th 2011, p.7.

setting is also an emphatic declaration of God's own character -something that is not always recognized when we first read Luke's nativity story.

The nativity setting had those implicit messages for the first generations of readers of Luke's Gospel. These same messages have become muted over the centuries, largely because of the romanticism given off by the Christmas Crib.

We have become entranced by the crib (the setting) without recognizing that aspects of the setting have historical antecedents, loaded with particular messages. Let me identify those historical antecedents.²

The manger³ is a reference to an opening verse in the Book of Isaiah written in the 740s BC. Isaiah was a prophet who sought to offer hope to the Jews whose city Jerusalem and its Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians and whose leaders had been transported to and colonized in Babylon. Isaiah first tried to find meaning in what had happened - a great national disaster.

In the first chapter Isaiah writes

The ox knows its owner,
and the ass its master's crib
But Israel does not know,
my people does not understand.⁴

The reference is to Israel's failure to recognize its Lord's visitation through the earlier voices of the prophets.

God's visitation becomes a theme of major importance to Luke in his gospel. Later in this gospel Luke will tell us Jesus as he draws near to his death will lament about Jerusalem 'you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.'⁵ This is the failure by the religious leadership to recognize who Jesus was -Son of God, long awaited Messiah.

So, the first emphasis that Luke makes in the nativity setting he creates is the need to recognize God's visitation in Jesus. And God's visitations occur at times of crisis.

The second emphasis is *how* God visits his people.

In the Old Testament, those books in the Bible that detail reflections upon God's interactions with Israel, the inn indicates how God is present among his people.

A significant use of the word inn is by the prophet Jeremiah who also wrote during the calamitous destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. This verse from Jeremiah is very suggestive:

Hope of Israel, their saviour in time
of trouble,
must you be like a stranger in the land,
like a traveller breaking his journey
to find a night's lodging?⁶

Using the word 'inn' (night's lodging) suggests that God's presence in Israel is not in the grandeur of the Temple but in everyday, humble settings.

² These ideas are laid out in John Drury's book Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel.1977. Atlanta: John Knox Press, pp.60-62.

³ Luke 2:7.

⁴ Isaiah1:3.

⁵ Luke 19:44.

⁶ Jeremiah 14:8. (The Revised English Bible)

And so, Luke tells us that when God's Son is born it is in a provincial town and born outside the lodging. Mary and Joseph were travellers, strangers, turning aside for the night, seeking a lodging place.

The third emphasis in Luke's account is the presence of the shepherds. There are historic meanings to be understood by the presence of the shepherds. All the great leaders in the formative history of God's people were shepherds - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and of course, the great King David.

The explicit reference to David is very clear for when the prophet Samuel anointed the young teenage David to be King over Israel, 'he was keeping the sheep of his father Jesse the Bethlehemite.'⁷ And so this reinforces the setting of Bethlehem as the place of a king. Jesus is born in Bethlehem and shepherds come to worship him in Bethlehem.

Saint Luke has made the setting a character in his nativity story. The setting carries voices from the past that are present to interpret the significance of the birth of Jesus. This significance continues to influence the Christian understanding of God.

The Christmas Crib says more than first meets the eye. Saint Luke in his setting of the birth of Jesus has reached back into the history of God's people to signify that God has acted to reveal God's character to us in this birth - a character hinted at in past statements by prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. God's character is humble and self-expending; not imperious and self-inflating. This is the original setting for Christmas and it forever stamps this meaning upon Christmas.

And from his very birth Jesus is outside, without security -vulnerable. That is the original setting for Christmas and it deepens the meaning of Christmas.

And the setting for Christmas this year in Australia? Is the setting in any degree similar to that in Bethlehem - amongst people who are humble, self-giving, aligned with those on the outside?

Will Australian society reflect in its values and practices the first divinely expressed values of Christmas - will we be self-giving to vulnerable others, will we be respectfully humble in our international influence and presence, will we be committed to the defenceless?

Hopefully, we will; for it is in this kind of setting, as Saint Luke's description of the Nativity declares, 'God visits and redeems God's people'.

The whole of the Gospel of Luke is detailing how God has visited his people. And still this Christmas Day the original paradox from Isaiah remains upon us -

The ox knows its owner,
and the ass its master's crib
But Israel does not know,
my people does not understand (is that us?).

Christmas is God's visitation to us in our history.

Christmas is a declaration that Jesus is the human face of God.⁸

To understand this is to understand Christmas.

⁷ 1 Samuel 16.

⁸ The title of a book by J.A.T. Robinson, 1973. The Human Face of God. London: SCM.