

Christward

The magazine of



January – February 2024

~Christmas (A)musings~

1: *Matthew wasn't stupid*

In a recent service where we indulged our liking for some bits of the Bible that don't usually get read, I talked about the genealogies at the start of Matthew and Luke's gospels. One amusement is the way in which Matthew derives Jesus' ancestral links to the Jewish heroes and heroines through Joseph, yet elsewhere has a story of virgin birth and no biological role for Joseph. An otherwise uninteresting article I read pointed out the Matthew was not stupid and would have been perfectly aware of the contradiction between the two stories. His point was to collect the stories that pointed to who he believed Jesus was and how he fulfilled the Jewish tradition. It is rather like the compilers of the first few chapters of the Hebrew scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) who were keen to collect all the stories of the tradition, to honour the tradition as it had been passed down, and not to try and make a single consistent narrative. Hence two creation stories, two versions of the Noah's Ark story with different numbers of animals, and many other examples. In the same way the Gospels are not history or biography or eye-witness accounts, but collections of the stories that were circulating a generation after the death of Jesus which witnessed to what this man had come to mean for those who had chosen to follow him. Stories with power.

2: *The "Inn with no room" never was*

When putting together our Christmas day service we pasted in as usual the Gospel for the day from a lectionary website – Luke's nativity story. On reading it we were a little taken aback by verse 7 which was translated as: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room." (NRSV updated 2021). "Guest room"? It seems that the translations which do not feel bound by the old AV of King James often use this or rather similar phrasing rather than the words we were expecting: "because

there was no place for them in the inn.” (NRSV Anglicised). Apparently the Greek word is the same as the word used for the “upper room” where the Last Supper was eaten. Luke had no inn, no rude inn-keeper, no wandering around Bethlehem looking for a room at the last minute. Rather, hospitable hosts who made room downstairs for the space and privacy needed for Mary to give birth instead of the crowded guest space upstairs. The Junior Church got it right when the reluctant actor given the Inn Keeper’s part responded “Of course I can help. We’ve lots of room and my wife is a midwife”. Except there was no Inn Keeper, but we will allow some dramatic licence.

Incidentally, we must have been told this in the past – why have we forgotten? Stories have power! And, yes, we did reinstate the inn!

3. All that is left is the Christmas story

With every passing year, the Christian story of Easter seems to recede further from public consciousness as the pagan spring festival reasserts itself; even the hot cross buns which Christians eat on Good Friday (a key feature of Christianity, according to our informants on the school curriculum) are available all year round.

But at Christmas, “tradition” must be followed, with each Nativity play or depiction incorporating, as well as the aforementioned innkeeper, several non-biblical elements including cows and donkeys (none mentioned), three kings (not kings, no number given) and singing angels (they didn’t sing, they spoke – I’m indebted to Pope Benedict for this one). And if people get their theology from carols, then heaven help us. Whoever decided that baby Jesus never cried? But it seems that the more implausible it all is, the more all those people who like saying that ours is a Christian country hold on to it. The silent baby Jesus is so much easier to ignore for the rest of the year than the adult teacher who challenged the status quo.

Steve & Gwyn

~Snippets of Hebrew ~

Word Play!

Hunger In the Desert

We had a service recently when we read that John the baptist announced Jesus coming, with the words, The voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord.

Jesus also spent time in the wilderness, and of his time in the wilderness we read,
Mark 1 v 13 “And Jesus was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan, and was with the wild beasts, and the angels ministered unto him.”

From a literary point of view, the writer might be saying that Jesus went into his own wilderness and confronted his own demons as it were, and they were represented by the wild beasts. Think of the Hero's journey. An oft repeated mythological motif indicating that the Hero had to face up to life and its challenges. And so the wilderness can represent any kind of barren place, spiritual, physical or psychological. Think of a mid life crisis, or a dark night of the soul as a wilderness. Something we all know something of, to a greater or lesser degree at some point, and sometimes more than once. So the cry in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, is, in the terms of the Hero's journey the Call to Adventure. The place to make ready one's way in life. To face one's demons. In this light, the saying “The desert shall blossom as the rose” takes on a different meaning. It is of more value psychologically than the literal interpretation.

In the Hebrew the phrase about crying in the wilderness reads:
“The voice of him that crieth; In the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

It is not someone in the wilderness crying out. It is a call to “prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness”. And since most people lived in a city or in a fertile area, the actual wilderness here is not being considered, although it is not excluded.

Like Israel coming out of Egypt making their way in the desert to a land flowing with milk and honey. The call is to make our way through our **own** desert to wholeness. Whilst the idea of John the Baptist in the desert heralding Jesus is not an invalid interpretation, there is however no Hebrew grammatical justification for it.

One of Jesus’ sayings comes from this event, Man shall not live by bread alone but by every **word** that comes from the mouth of God.

A Famine

Amos 8 v 11 “Behold the days come saith the Lord that I will send a famine in the land, but not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.”

Although there are occasions when God says he will send worse things, this time it is made clear that it is not literal. However, that does not mean that all other calamities **are** going to be literal. Perhaps this text makes it clear that the calamity is not literal precisely to make the reader ponder the possibility of alternative interpretations. It seems to say people will suffer from a degree of deafness to wisdom. Perhaps such a manner of expression is more potent than saying “For the time will come when *they will not endure sound doctrine.*” 2 Timothy 4 v 3. For doctrine, read wisdom.

Does all this mean that not everything in the Bible is literal. No, but it does mean there is a myriad of possible interpretations. And it might also indicate that the ancients were much more attuned to what we mean by “As you sow, so shall you reap”.

It might be worth noting that both the desert and a famine are situations where you could die through lack of food.

I for one would say that some of the conversations we have had about church, and how we see it have been nourishing, and as far as that goes I am not experiencing a famine.

All these different repeated patterns, from wilderness and famine, and beyond, bear some similarity to a holograph, in which the whole is found in all the parts. Fractal patterns found in nature point in the same direction. The universe is like an atom. There is a centre with objects orbiting it. The same is true of society, where there are centres around which people orbit. The ability to recognise patterns could take us a long way in being able to recognise some of the Bible's messages. Perhaps this is something that could be explored further.

Geoff Walker

~ A Northern Wind - Britain 1962 -65~

The best of times, Christmas has come and gone and so has New Year. I can settle down before the pile of books that my generous family have provided to tide me over until my birthday in June. Usually I will read the first chapter of each book before deciding which one to start with. This year however there was no need because that was determined when I sent Santa my letter.

In the early years of this century David Kynaston started on his project 'Tales of a New Jerusalem' a social history of post war Britain from 1945 to 1979. In 2008 he published 'Austerity Britain' 1945 - 1951. There followed 'Family Britain 1951 - 57, Modernity Britain 1957- 1962 and now after some nine years 'A Northern Wind 1962-65. He did publish in 2021 'On the Cusp 1962' which dealt with June to October 1962 but it has been quite a wait for this present volume.

Why choose the period 1945-1979? Well, in 1945 the Labour Government started to introduce a programme of egalitarian reforms including the formation of the National Health Service, the nationalisation of our utilities, the railways and so much more. A New Jerusalem was being built. Thirty four years later Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative government started on dismantling it. Kynaston wanted to tell the story of these years 'a story of

ordinary citizens as well as mandarins, of customers as well as producers, of provinces as well as London, of the everyday as well as the seismic, of the mute and inarticulate as well as the all too fluent opinion-formers, of the Singing Postman as well as John Lennon.it does try to offer an intimate, multilayered, multivoiced, unsentimental portrait that evolved in such way during these 34 years as to make it possible for the certainties of '1945' to become the counter-certainties of 1979. Many of us grew up and were formed during that evolution. We live and our children continue to live - with the consequences.'

Kynaston is brilliantly successful in letting the ordinary citizens speak drawing on our diaries*, news papers, letters and reports, entertainment reviews, views on the weather, health, schooling....almost everything that goes to make up our lives is gathered together and set against the great national and international events taking place at that time. For people who lived through that 34 year period it is not just a trip down 'memory lane' it is almost like reliving part of your life. For their children and grandchildren it is an opportunity to find out what Britain was like during those years. I've often heard people of my age saying how much they regret not asking their parents, when they had the opportunity, about life in the first part of the twentieth century. Kynaston remedies that for those born after 1979 and does that in a manner which is not simply informative but a joy to read.

Do not be put off by the size of the books, they are all some six hundred pages long, but you don't need to read each volume in one go. You can dip in and out of them using the index and I can guarantee that most people will read far more than they originally intended.

Just a brief extract from the current volume as a taster:

On Saturday 12th January 1963 the BBC broadcast the most controversial edition yet of its satirical programme 'That Was the Week That Was' (TW3).

'Very good tonight,' noted Hugh Selbourne, 'but blasphemous effort by David Frost on comparative religion.' This was the programme's 'Consumer Guide to Religion', a Frost monologue based on the premise that some of the world's leading religions should be subjected to a Which?- style analysis - whether Judaism (membership of the oldest club in the world) or the Roman Catholic Church ('the confessional mechanism is standard; it operates as an added safety -factor to correct running mistakes, making Salvation almost foolproof') or Protestantism or Islam or Buddhism, not to mention the secular religion of Communism ('its chief prophet appears to have no background in industry at all'). Best Buy, judged by Frost, was the Church of England, 'a jolly good little faith for a very moderate outlay'.

Immediate telephone response to the BBC was a record 246 complaints: 'I do not think it says much for the people who want this form of humour, or those who dispense it, ' commented next day the Bishop of Leicester..... Overall by this time TW3 was being watched by some 15% of the population (excluding under fives)... 'The vast majority have rejoiced in the programme's wit and "hard-hitting", 'satire reckoned audience research soon afterwards about TW3's faithful.'

What ordinary people thought about 'The Black and White Minstrel Show' follows this extract but to find out you will have to get hold of the book.

All of the books in Kynaston's project are well worth the reading.

Alan Redhouse

***The Bishopsgate Institute Great Diary Project** , archives and makes publicly available a growing collection of more than 17,000 unpublished diaries. It was launched in 2007.

Diaries reveal 'the extraordinary and the everyday in individual lives, diaries help us explore important issues for the individual and society.

The most remarkable details get recorded in diaries. The weather, movement of birds, the price of food, the regularity of the postal service and a hundred other matters ignored in the history books. Some people comment extensively on the politics around them, others take no notice of such things at all. Among all these come the excitement of children and holidays and remarks on religion, illness, death. All human life, in fact, is there, packed into small pages where every entry – for the future historian – is accurately dated. And what might seem today to be mundane and unimportant will, before long, take on quite a different significance. Imagine if we had hundreds and hundreds of diaries from people in Shakespeare's time today!

Diaries at Risk

Old diaries are at risk. Life-long diary-keepers frequently make no provision for what should happen to their diaries long term, and people who inherit them often dispose of them unthinkingly. Sometimes diaries are dusty, with resident spiders; sometimes they are in difficult handwriting or take up a lot of room. Diaries are also supposed to be private, and people often feel it is their duty to destroy them and keep them from prying eyes. The work of the Great Diary Project is to rescue diaries like these from skips and bonfires and look after them for the future as important items of everyone's history. Anyone who has old or unwanted diaries can be sure that Bishopsgate Institute will take them gratefully and look after them.'

~ New Year's Day Church Walk ~

Lorna's inspired idea of a walk on New Year's Day at the relatively civilised time of 11.00 saw ten of us putting our best feet forward on a glorious winter's day – one of the few so far! – and on a *relatively*

mud-free path, as promised by yours truly, from Stretford to Jackson's boat along the mighty Mersey, then back by the shores of Sale Water Park. You may judge for yourself whether everyone had a good time. No one fell in anywhere, though there was a fair amount of slipping and sliding. The final picture is a Lowry-esque view of the many others enjoying a stick-like sojourn along the river – so many people out and about, it felt quite like a lockdown-day...

Andy






Number 524 Published 7th January 2024

The magazine of Union Chapel Fallowfield(Baptist),
2b Wellington Road, Fallowfield Manchester, M14 6EQ

Web Site: www.unionchapelbaptist.org.uk

Church Office:  225-4226

Editor: Alan Redhouse:  445-0020;
email: alan.redhouse@virgin.net

Secretary: Nicola Hamilton  270 0087

Treasurer: *Position Vacant* 

Deacons: Enid Welford, Nicola Hamilton, Andy Howes, Lorna Richardson, Margaret Edmonds, Brenda Marston.