

The power in the Nativity

Christmas 2018, Cashmere Presbyterian Church. Silvia Purdie

So, I wonder, what do you think about kids in a secular primary school doing a dramatization of the nativity as a school drama project?

What, I wonder, would you say if you were talking to someone who was upset that a secular school was shoving religion down the throats of children? If someone asked you why you think it's OK for kids to be learning the Christian myth of the nativity when we are not teaching them stories from the Koran ... what might you say?

Actually, truth is, for most of us, me anyway, I'm not good with those kinds of conversations. I find myself coming over all wooly and pathetic when faced with someone with strong convictions, and looking for a way out. Especially when they are confronting my faith.

But what would you say, if you could? What do you really think about this? Is the nativity story history, mythology or theology? Should all children in NZ know this story, that we so much take for granted as the foundation for Christmas?

What surprises me is the growing sense in our society (and in other countries around the world) that religion is dangerous. The call for schools to ban the nativity story from school grounds comes from a fear that any religion will be bad for them. Really? That is just so not my experience. Really? – is the truth about Christmas becoming subversive? So counter-normal that we have to protect our kids from it?

So, what would you say about this, if you could? How do you feel about the nativity story? What do you want to tell your children and grandchildren about it?

Here's my take on it, in case you are interested - here goes.

I would say, first, that the birth of Jesus is historical, and historically significant. There really was a person called Jesus of Nazareth. He is not a myth. And he really did make a bigger impact on human history than any other single person. You simply cannot understand society and history over the past 2000 years without a working knowledge of what Jesus taught and the conviction of his followers that Jesus was raised from the dead. The values of the Christian faith have permeated every nation. They have been the impetus for care for those in need, principles for loving family life, the foundation of justice, motivation to study the world and learn, as well as spiritual practices of faith, prayer and worship which have produced some of the greatest music, art and poetry the world has known.

I know I'm biased, but I genuinely think that people should study Jesus, and that faith in Jesus has been a force for good in human history.

So, yes, let's teach our children the stories about his birth. We can't know how many of the details in Luke and Matthews' gospels are historically accurate, but we can reliably accept that there were some unusual events surrounding his birth, which do make for a darned good story.

So, first is the truth of history. And second, I'd make the case for the truth of metaphor. Any good story has more than one layer of meaning, and the nativity

story has more layers than most. As children grow their minds grow in complexity, and ability to hold different kinds of truth.

I am passionate about the Nativity story because it means so much to me. I love creating the tableau, as we did this morning, because each element in the nativity is rich with meaning, pregnant with possibility.

The nativity story is fascinating on a human level, complex with issues about family life, marriage, parenthood and belonging. Luke's claim that Jesus was born in a manger because the guest room was full explodes with questions for me ... were Mary and Joseph were rejected by his extended family in Bethlehem, if so, why? Why didn't Joseph marry her in Nazareth before they left? If Jesus grew up with a shadow over him, gossip about Joseph not really being his father, how did that affect him?

Lots more questions, with answers we can only reach towards.

And I haven't even started to touch on the other characters, the shepherds, angels and wise men and their stories.

What really fascinates me about all of these characters in the nativity drama is that between them they reach across the whole breadth of human society, from the lowest dirtiest homeliest shepherds to the rich and learned, scholars from a distant land. From the gold to the dung, they come to stand together at the manger, bringing with them all the breadth of humanity. No one is excluded. These figurines stand in for us, all of us.

And it's not just the human, but all the created world also. The manger itself is the centre. Mentioned three times in Luke chapter 2. A manger, an animal feeding trough. Not a normal place for a newborn baby, far too earthy. With the manger we picture the animals standing around, the ox and ass, sheep and donkey. And the setting, the shed and the straw. These elements of nature form the welcome for the Christ child. God is at home in the rawness of the natural world. This central claim of the nativity must soak into our hearts and minds, and inform how we ourselves relate to the natural world. The Christian faith teaches that the natural world is not ours to use and destroy. It is not peripheral or unimportant to our lives. The nativity challenges us with the claim that God chose the humble and the real and entered in. The whole earth is present in the nativity in these simple elements of animal and trough and hay.

And then comes the final layer of truth, the truth of heaven. These days we call it spirituality. The nativity is not a harmless cute story of sheep and a baby. It is a powerful provocative account of the divine bursting through, quite uninvited. Angels rip the very fabric of the universe. The star shines an ethereal light over everything. I love the nativity story and I want children to know it too because it is a sacred story. It has a hush to it unlike anything else in our cultural heritage. Even for people with no understanding of spirituality, despite all those tacky cliché Christmas cards, still there is something almost tangibly holy about the nativity.

And how do we picture that holiness? What is the most holy place in this holy scene? It is there, a mother holding a tiny baby. That is the centre of God-with-us. There is where it speaks so profoundly to us of love and presence.

And there, God is.

There in the baby, the promise of God with us, Emmanuel.

And there in the mother's arms, the perfect expression of human love.

There is adoration. There is incarnation.

In the rawness and realness of the created earth

In the breadth and complexity of human civilization

Bathed in the light of divinity

So there you have it, my rather rambling attempt to answer the question of why I believe that all children should be taught the nativity story. History and theology, myth and spirituality, values and intimacy. It's all there. Gathered around the manger.