

## Round John Virgin

My son's housemaster produced the best Christmas story I have ever heard. The children had been drawing nativity pictures. One child had a lovely crib, with Mary, and the baby, the animals and so on. But at the back was an enormous fat smiling figure. The teacher asked who that was. 'That's Round John Virgin', said the child. And indeed, don't we sing 'Round John Virgin, Mother and Child' in 'Silent Night'? The little kid had made the best sense he could of it. Neither *yon* nor *virgin* were part of his vocabulary. It happens all the time. Indeed it was one of my own children who told me solemnly that after Jesus had been born, all the little boys in Bethlehem were killed by the Great Herring. Who said Jaws was a modern story?

Children - and grown ups - make the best sense they can of what they hear. But it is not always the truth. Culture can have a tremendous impact. I read a fascinating book by social anthropologists about how Christmas has been -what is their dreadful word – *inculturated* - by people around the world. Let me share just a couple of examples. Japan apparently goes great guns on Christmas. The pop groups wish everyone 'Meri Kurisumasu' - and there is great emphasis on Christmas Eve - known as Holy Night, or Silent Night - as a time for romantic dinners, love and presents - because of course commercialism is powerful in the Japanese mind. The book tells of a Tokyo department store with a huge Crib - life-size figures of Mary and Joseph, shepherds and animals. And inside the manger is -yes, you are right - Father Christmas!

A little nearer home, there is a fascinating exploration of the secularisation of Christmas in religious America. Remember, a far higher percentage of Americans are churchgoers than in this country - but such is the risk of causing offence that you are supposed to wish people a happy holiday season, not Christmas. And Santa Claus is much more important than here. Once you start thinking about this, lots of things become quite significant. The Christmas story is full of miraculous elements - the virginal conception, angels and so on. Santa also has miracles - flying reindeer, bottomless sacks of toys, and omnipresence - everyone gets a visit in a single night. The Christian story is about Christ coming down from heaven to bring the gifts of salvation and love, and then ascending. Santa comes down the chimney, brings gifts that express love and then ascends back up the chimney whence he came. The large custom of children writing letters to Santa is a form of prayer, of course. And some research shows that children do actually kneel and pray to Santa. Then of course God and Santa share the gift of knowing everything - whether children have been good or not (and again that sense of being rewarded is much stronger in the States than here). God blesses, or doesn't; Santa brings presents, or doesn't. So you could go on - Santa's elves are a secular kind of angel, the reindeer replace the animals of the stable. Santa lives in a distant home which is white - a symbol of purity. And songs about Santa replace carols. And that is something we observe quite strongly in this country too. How many times have you been to school or nursery nativity plays which have included 'Jingle Bells'?

In fact we have to be very careful at laughing at others, because we are just as likely to have 'inculturated' as they have. Sometimes our picturing of Christmas, and our understanding of it, is mistaken simply from a factual point of view. Curiously, one of the most disturbing things about visiting Bethlehem for the first time was to find that it was on top of a hill. I had always imagined shepherds coming down from the hillside into the town to find the baby. That they must have gone *up* the hillside was a shattering of all my imaginings over a lifetime. But you can't argue with topography -that is how the land lies, as it were.

I started out with a story from a school - and it is probably in nativity plays, and from nativity plays that we get some of our confusions - incidentally someone told me that they had heard a new collective noun from a headmaster - he talked of a 'nativity of tea-towels' after watching the shepherds in his school nativity play. But countless such plays, and indeed carols, tell children that a star led the shepherds to the baby in Bethlehem. You won't find that in the Bible. What of course has happened is that the story Matthew tells of the coming of the Magi, the wise men (and incidentally he doesn't say whether there were three or forty-seven of them - he just mentions three gifts) - that story includes them being led by a star - not surprising as they were probably astrologers, and their gifts were the tools of their trade. But close reading of the text shows that we have pushed two events together. I tried in my parishes to keep them apart if I could - our Crib was lovely, but there wouldn't be Magi in it until the New Year, when we think about Epiphany. Matthew talks of them visiting the 'young child' - and the word is one which means a toddler, not a baby. That of course ties in with Herod (or the Great Herring) killing children as old as two - the bit of the Christmas story we prefer to forget. And what is more, Matthew talks about them going into the 'house' with their gifts - which implies they were no longer slumming it in the barn. In a sense accuracy doesn't matter all that much - but it seems a pity to go on teaching children, not to say adults, things which are additions to the story. I think it goes a bit deeper than that quotation from Pooh-Bah in the Mikado, where he talks of something being 'corroborative details intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative'.

The narrative of Christmas doesn't need to be glossed. But whether we have the considerable glossing of other cultures, or the glossing that we see as entirely justified, because it is our own - we do it. There is no way we can ever have the thing absolutely pure and simple, as it were. Every re-telling is precisely that. It happened a long time ago and a long way away. We make the best sense of those gaps that we can. Sometimes that will be rough and ready: sometimes it may be a bit misleading. But the story can stand it. The important thing is that the story is told and re-told, because it has the power to make people think. They may accept and rejoice in it. They may reject and make fun of it. But they know the story, in some form or other. There is one form of it that is supremely important, I believe. Let me lead you into thinking about that by quoting a hymn written years ago by Sidney Carter - a man who has never ducked the awkward questions. It goes like this:

Your holy hearsay is not evidence  
Give me the good news in the present tense.  
What happened nineteen hundred years ago  
May not have happened - how am I to know?  
The living truth is what I long to see;  
I cannot lean upon what used to be.

So! Shut the Bible up and show me now  
The Christ you talk about is living now.

Whatever the details of the story in historical terms - if it remains locked up in history it is only of passing significance. It is important to know that the basic fact - that Jesus was born - **is** history, and not fiction. But it can't stay as history. The child who was born grew up to live and die and rise from death. And that changed history. This story is not about a person in the past, but a person in the present. Sidney Carter was absolutely right - we need to hear about it **now**. And we sing words which take precisely that line - 'Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today'. The miracle of Christ's birth is that it goes on happening - that people find he is alive and with them, just as those people in Bethlehem found a new life kicking and crying in the cradle.

When we come to Communion it is to meet with a living Lord, not to remember a hero of the past. We come to recall the whole story - his birth, his death, his resurrection, his life being available to us now.

No doubt we get things wrong. Maybe God smiles at our misinterpretations, just as we smile at the way some others 'get it wrong' as we like to say. But if we are meeting with Jesus, then it can't be too far wrong - and that is what we come to do as we kneel at the altar. May God bless us, and whatever we make of this story, just as surely as he blesses that child who drew Round John Virgin. He got it wrong, but his heart was in the right place.