

## CHRISTMAS EVE 2022

The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach 24. 1-12

John 1. 1-14

At Christmas our attention is firmly focused on the birth of the person of Jesus. There's no question that this is what it's all about. Off to Bethlehem we go; once again. We do this because the destination of all of the action in the first chapters of the gospels of Matthew and Luke are on bringing their readers to the infant Jesus in the manger. John the Baptist; Zechariah and Elizabeth; Mary and Joseph, Herod and the wise men; Simeon and Anna. All their stories point to the birth of Jesus and the fulfillment in this child of longings, poured out over centuries, by the Jewish prophets.

We tell this story over and over, year after year in different ways: in our nativity scenes; in Advent calendars; on our Christmas cards; we sing the story in our carols. Where would Christmas be without Jesus in the manger?

But for the gospels of Mark and John there is no baby in the manger; no birth story; not even a mention of miraculous comings and goings around the birth of Jesus, the visitation of angels and mortals of all rank; no long genealogies stretching back to Abraham and to Adam. Have you ever wondered why? Why the birth was not important to them? Have you ever wondered what you'd think about Jesus if there was no miraculous birth narrative? Would you still believe? Or would your believing be different?

Last Sunday in our carol service we heard readings from the wisdom tradition in Judaism. It is not a tradition we are really familiar with, so I wanted to explore it and its riches tonight. There was not time to reflect on these readings on Sunday – the service was so full - and there was enough to take in simply hearing these readings, many of them for the first time, and enjoy the carol singing together.

So, to John. John's gospel, instead of giving us a birth story wows us with his flights of prose as he introduces us to the cosmic Christ; the Word made flesh; the logos of God; the mind of God; present with God from before time and yet now incarnated in the person of Jesus; this one so full of grace and truth.

What John gives us, instead of a miraculous birth story, is a window into the wisdom tradition within Judaism; deep and long through the life of Israel. This tradition is something more difficult to grasp onto than the course of events painted by Matthew and Luke which lead us to the birth; you struggle to make a nativity play out of the Word made Flesh. But the beauty of this language in John and the passage from the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach, is no less compelling when we allow its poetry to touch us and then hear its resonance in John.

As Matthew looks to the Hebrew scriptures for their fulfillment in Jesus so John also looks to the scriptures in Sirach and other wisdom writers for their fulfillment: *then the*

*Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. He said, "Make your dwelling in Jacob, <sup>[[1]]</sup>and in Israel receive your inheritance." <sup>[[1]]</sup>Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be.*

And so John tells us that *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.* The Greek here actually reads that the word became flesh and pitched tent among us. The word which is translated as dwelt or lived among us is the ancient Greek expression for pitching tent; setting up camp; living alongside; throwing in your lot; becoming neighbour to.

So John here echoes this wisdom tradition in Sirach and its confirmation of the divine command to go and pitch tent in Israel. Between Sirach and John we hear the echo of the longings of the wisdom tradition fulfilled in Jesus.

Tragically this wisdom tradition of the church has been all but lost to us in the west; you could say that any form of wisdom is patently absent from most forms of human activity in the west in our contemporary world. But Wisdom, Sophia, was a pillar of the life of the Eastern church and continues to be so. The great cathedral of the Eastern church in Constantinople, now Istanbul, is named no less than Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom. This church was the focus of the life of the Eastern church for about 1000 years and for Eastern Orthodox Christians the second person of the Trinity is often known by the name Sophia – not the Son, but Sophia, wisdom – and in feminine form, to boot. The second person of the Trinity as the embodied wisdom of God.

When we begin to get a sense of this wisdom tradition, the coming of the wise men from the east in Matthew's gospel actually takes on a different significance. The magi are not just some late arrivals to the stable at Bethlehem, or second-rate bit players, as they so often are portrayed in nativity plays. They are Matthew's sign of the fulfillment of hopes that the wisdom of God may be manifest in a world which is so consistently un-wise and unjust.

In 2006 I attended the Parliament of World's Religions here in Melbourne. It was so delightful to be together with so many people of faith from so many different traditions and parts of the world. What did strike me was the presence there of the members of three ancient faiths: Zoroastrians, Hindus and Buddhists. Zoroastrianism; a religion which emerged in ancient Persia; Hinduism, of course from India, and; Buddhism from further East. In the presence of these people, and as I listened to the perspectives and concerns of their faith traditions, I realised that maybe it was members of these more ancient faiths than ours, that Matthew tells us came to recognise and honour Jesus. I became aware that in all of these faiths, including our own, was this primal human quest to seek and find the presence of the wisdom of the invisible God present in ones who strive to live with wisdom. I felt a deep unity between each of our faiths in our quests to seek God.

Tragically our focus on and attachment to the baby Jesus is symptomatic of our attachment to historical fact and literal truth in the church. In some senses it infantilises

us in the church, preventing us from maintaining the quest of seeking the wisdom of God. For surely this is the task of life: to seek to enable the spirit of the living God to become present and infuse us with the life of heaven.

This Christmas can I invite you to contemplate this wisdom of God come into world in the life of Jesus. Can I invite you to contemplate how this one in whom John says is life, might desire life for you. Can I invite you to contemplate how this one who embodied the wisdom and mercy of God so fully might be calling you to live more simply, more justly, live more equitably, live more compassionately and live more lightly on this sacred earth.

May God grant us all grace and truth as we seek the divine wisdom for ourselves and our world.

Let us pray:

Holy, eternal God

grant us your grace

help us to recognize the places in ourselves where the seed of heaven may be sown and grow.

That our lives may become infused with the life of heaven  
and we may live to your praise and glory all our days. amen

Andrew Boyle