

Sermon Christmas Day 2013

Isaiah 9.2-7, Ps 96, Titus 2.11-14, Luke 2.1-20

Fr Richard Wilson

The cartoon that has been included with your service booklet was made in 1979 by Michael Leunig.¹ It is called 'A Nativity Scene'. *A nativity* but it is, of course, really Leunig's contemporary interpretation of Luke's account of the birth of Jesus. I want to look at how this nativity has been represented.

It is fairly obvious who is who. Mary sits under the streetlamp, perhaps a single mother, Jesus is in her lap, apparently breastfeeding. Joseph, the one reaching to Mary is also a central figure.

The three standing men are the shepherds, not, I think, the Magi. All are homeless men. Some dogs and cats look on. It is a street scene in a city. A star shines overhead but the main light comes from a streetlamp, the mother and child are placed centrally in the circle of light. The rest of the city is asleep perhaps, oblivious of the drama unfolding, in darkness.

The expressions on the six faces are revealing. Jesus seems content, as a feeding baby might be, oblivious of the tension we can see in the others. Mary looks stunned, even frightened, is she already worried about what will become of her and the baby?

Joseph's his relationship with Mary may be uncertain. From the way he tentatively offers her a drink, perhaps a glass of water, his care for her is quite clear. As for most men at a birth, I expect, is in awe of what has taken place, but looking for something useful to do. He has learned, rather early, that the best thing a man can do for breastfeeding mothers is to bring a glass of water. He has a cigarette in his hand – it challenges our notions of political correctness.

The three men, the shepherds, show mixed expressions, awe fused with joy. Two clutch at one another, they seem unsure if they may be admitted to this scene. A third clasps his hands to his chest, smiling – pure joy suffuses his face. One could be offering a gift but I think it is a dustbin in the background – they have nothing material to give, but love.

All eyes and the point of brightness focus on Mary and the Child – *some* of those who have walked in darkness have seen a great light.

This midrash on Luke's nativity, by Leunig, deliberately provokes our reaction. For some it will be a negative commentary – because it is truthful. It opposes our culture's usual interpretation of the nativity and even Luke's, because our culture tempts us into a misplaced glorification of the birth scene. Not that it is not right to glorify but not the figures in the drama without also glorifying God, who is its author.

We might also be angry because in spite of our celebrations and possibly even our earnest efforts and our prayers, the homeless, the destitute, the lost, the mad, the bad and refugee depicted in this picture are still with us in reality. It is sobering too, to think that these least of our community may see the incarnation before we do.

¹ This cartoon can be seen at: <http://cs.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=63933>

We are provoked to ask who is able to approach this holy circle of light, to observe, even to participate in this authentic nativity. The ones who are there have come unencumbered by the burdens of this world – which are the desire for material things, the desire for power. Moving toward this circle of light has meant for them leaving behind the conventional measures of human worth. That is not to say it is exclusive, the circle of light will not keep you out, rather, one's adhesion to the world will hold you back.

Keeping God at the forefront therefore challenges our culture's appropriation of the nativity in all its tawdry commercialism and ersatz jollity, its assumption that because it is Christmas so we should be happy, but without knowing why. In this picture as in Luke, there is no tinsel, no Christmas tree, no piped carols, no Santa.

So, Leunig invites to travel into this nativity more lightly, less encumbered. As it critiques human endeavour it invites us to shift our attachments from things of this world to things of God.

However we react to this picture, I believe it is God's intention that it be redemptive, that it provides us somehow with the means to respond to its challenges, however they encounter us, in a life giving way.

I could not presume to tell you where life lies in this picture for you. Look into the cartoon, it will tell you. For my part, I am challenged, not for the first time, to think about my relationship with the least among us, especially within our community. My comfort is discomfited when I look into the circle of light on this page. But that is a positive thing because it leads me to propose for myself, a response. It proposes change. Change I might make for and in me, so that I might, in a very small way, make a change in the world.

With such a future in store, then it is possible to celebrate. Here is a prayer of celebration Michael Leunig has written:

It is timely that we give thanks
for the lives of all prophets, teachers, healers,
and revolutionaries, living and dead,
acclaimed or obscure, who have rebelled,
worked and suffered for the cause of love and joy.
We also celebrate that part of us, that part
within ourselves, which has rebelled, worked
and suffered for the cause of love and joy.
We give thanks and celebrate. Amen.