



The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 7th January, 2024

"Christmas Stories... after Christmas"

"Thinking on Grace"

Julia Baird, in "Bright shining"

These comments follow a section where Dr Baird talks about the Christian understanding of grace in GOD, and goes on to explore how this is reflected in human life and relationship.

"Grace is more than simple kindness. Grace is both too great to be described in words, and yet described in words, which is why so many thinkers have grappled with it for decades. It's not esoteric, it's wrapped up in the everyday, but it's still extraordinary. It spawns generosity, compassion, and empathy. It involves understanding, recognising another person's humanity and walking in another's shoes, which can pave the way for forgiveness.

Poet Mary Oliver wrote that where other people might use words like 'chance', 'luck', 'coincidence', or 'serendipity', she would choose 'grace', even though she didn't know exactly what it was. *Anne Lamott said: "I do not understand the mystery of grace- only that it meets us where we are but does not leave it where it found us."*

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### Mark 1:9-14

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of GOD, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of GOD has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

## So... Christmas.

The trees and the tinsel, and the lights are packed away, the carols are mostly done with for another year. The hot cross buns were in the shops on Boxing Day, and we move on. But what of Christmas do we take with us into this new year?

Has it changed us at all? Or have we done it too many times for that?

Which stories that we remembered and rehearsed over the last few weeks, go with us? And in what way?

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In 2006 a movie called "Talledega Nights" was released: a story about NASCAR racing in the USA, and a driver called Ricky Bobby. If you didn't see or don't remember it, don't feel bad – it was a stinker!

I mention it now because I remember a scene where Ricky Bobby and his family are sitting around the dinner table, and it's Ricky Bobby's turn to say 'grace'.

He begins: "*Dear sweet baby Jesus, thank you for thy bounty...*" before he's interrupted by his wife who says "*Jesus grew up, you know: It's kind of off-putting that you keep praying to a baby.*".

He responds, "*Well I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I'm saying grace. When it's your turn you can pray to teenage Jesus, or beardy Jesus, or whichever Jesus you like best, but I like the baby version the best, do you hear me?*"

I don't think Ricky Bobby would like Mark's Gospel - no baby Jesus anywhere! And that always interests me, I must confess. (Not the Ricky Bobby part, the part about Mark's Gospel)

Matthew and Luke have their stories of Jesus' infancy, whether it's the flight into Egypt in Matthew, or Luke's story of the presentation to Anna and Simeon in the Temple. But not Mark, the earliest Gospel story (or John either, for that matter).

Here, Jesus simply arrives on the scene as a 30 something, soon to be itinerant preacher. The beginning of his story in Mark, is rolling up to be baptised by John the Baptist. There's a fair school of thought that says Jesus was a follower of John, who set out on his own path after John was arrested. Mark suggests that might be the case, but we can't know for sure.

So, why no interest in the infancy stories in Mark? Why no census, no star, stable or animals, no manger or wise men from the east etc? Again, we can't really know. The most likely answer, though, is that Mark was much more interested in Jesus the man, and his ministry. We imagine that the stories later told by Matthew and Luke were in circulation by Mark's time, as part of the oral witness to Jesus, but they're not his focus. That's ok, I like Mark's Gospel anyway! (I'm sure he'd be pleased to know that!!)

But that brings me back to my initial question: What of Christmas do we take with us into this new year?

The community around us has packed up the Christmas stories for another year, and will shortly be obsessed by St Valentine's Day as the next commercial festival.

So do we put the stories away now... or do we allow them to sit alongside the stories of Jesus: the man in whom we believe we glimpse holiness?

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Our passage from Mark's Gospel today holds two stories: Jesus' baptism, followed immediately by his experience in the wilderness. (the phrase "*and immediately*" crops up a lot in Mark).

Two very different experiences: remembered, celebrated, and understood by Jesus' followers as clues to his identity and calling, shaping how they would follow his way in the world.

For Mark and his storytelling sources, these stories become part of the 'legend' of Jesus that begins to be shaped after his death, as they reflect on all that they had seen and heard of him in his life and ministry. The same is true of the various birth and infancy narratives that came to be told in Matthew and Luke's gospels, in the decades after Mark's.

They are best seen as part of the 'BIG' story emerging around Jesus in the decades and centuries after his death – each with their own 'point' and purpose in the telling.

(There are many more infancy stories, by the way, and 'gospels' too, that weren't accepted by the early church as authentic. My favourite of these is "*The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*", which invests young Jesus with some pretty awesome power, including lengthening pieces of timber after Joseph cut them too short. It's perhaps unsurprising that this one didn't make the grade!)

For some people, it's an issue that the gospels are different, with different emphases and language. For me, that's only an issue if we're trying to line them up as a single story – kind of like 'getting our straight' for a court room witness.

The kind of witness the gospels present is different - a witness to one in whom people believed they had seen something of the way of GOD in the midst of human life: sacred, messy, vulnerable, faithful, compassionate and gracious life!

A witness also reflected in the quote from Anne Lamott in Julia Baird's book "Bright Shining", speaking of grace: "*I do not understand the mystery of grace- only that it meets us where we are but does not leave it where it found us.*"

The birth stories, the life stories, the death stories, the resurrection stories... told that we might hear and see in them, something of that same way, that same grace: not only in Jesus, but in our life, and in all life! **That's the story I take with me into the new year.**

And in the name of the holy presence in whom we live, move, and have our being, may that be our blessing too. Amen