
Christmas is Really for the Grown-Ups

John 1:1-14

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 24, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Around 15 years ago I had the opportunity to be in northern India in December. The churches in Delhi had a remarkable tradition I'd never contemplated before. They had nativity plays, like everyone else. But all the adult characters – Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the angels, the wise men, Herod and so on, were played by *grown-ups*.

I was flabbergasted. How could the church in India have got it so wrong? Surely they must understand that the whole point of nativity plays is that they be performed by children. Surely December is to be filled by fathers comforting their daughters with the reassuring words that not everyone can play Mary (and that Third Angel really is the crucial role), mothers finding squares of burlap that look convincing on the head of Joseph without being too scratchy, and Sunday School teachers persuading a reluctant wise man from the east that there's a subtle but significant difference between frankincense and Frankenstein. Everyone knows the unique charm of Christmas is lost if adults take it too seriously. I sat there in Delhi and thought, *Don't these people realize that Christmas is really for the children?*

But look what happens when you see a nativity play performed by adults in a country like India, a place where to be a Christian is always to experience being in a minority, often to face cultural discrimination, and sometimes to find yourself in a place of physical danger. You start to see aspects of the story that get overlooked when it's all about a little donkey on a dusty road.

You see for a start that Christmas is about suffering people. The children of Israel are living in occupied territory. Rome is an empire, which has no interest in its subject peoples other than extracting from them money and raw materials. At every place in the Christmas story we see the reality of oppression. The story starts with a census. Why a census? In order to extract more money. Joseph has to travel with his pregnant wife the 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Do the authorities care about Mary's condition? Do they compensate Joseph for hours lost at the carpenter's lathe or expenses incurred on an arduous journey? Of course they don't. And then there's Herod, a puppet king suspended by the fragile threads of his own ego. Herod hears of a new king born in Bethlehem, and suddenly the knives are out and every boy-child is put to the sword. The holy family emigrate to Egypt, fast as a donkey can take them.

Just look how this story touches on a wide swathe of human suffering. This is a people living in fear, like Iraq under Saddam Hussein or Burma under military rule or the Congo under Mobutu or Ethiopia under Mengistu. Democracy is out of the question, military revolt is absurd, and finding a safe place to survive and thrive is pretty unusual. As often happens with military oppression, we then get displaced populations. Joseph and Mary are first forcibly relocated, like a bunch of people are experiencing right now in Sudan after the independence of South Sudan, or like so many Greeks and Turks were after the creation of modern Turkey in 1922.

Then Mary and her husband and baby son find themselves homeless, with no place to stay in Bethlehem. (I wonder whether as they were homeless in Bethlehem Joseph saw strangers pointing at him and his family and overheard anyone saying if he wasn't so lazy and got himself a proper job he wouldn't be homeless. Of course Joseph *does* have a proper job: he's just been forced out of it by the regime. But maybe the local Bethlehem population isn't all that interested in another sob story.) Then the holy family are forced to become refugees, having to flee Bethlehem for Egypt in search of asylum.

So this is a story about political oppression, harsh taxes, displaced people, homelessness, unemployment, vulnerable refugees and asylum-seekers. That's the danger of performing it in a place like Delhi and having it acted out by adults who themselves know the very real possibility of any or all of these realities. We might have to recognize what it's really about. And the truth is, we don't want to think about such realities. We don't

want to think that our own political system and the demands of our own economy could have comparable effects on far-flung places to those brought about by the Roman Empire and its client regimes all those years ago.

We don't want the cozy Christmas story besmirched by such tawdry human and political realities. We don't want to spoil things by thinking of the oppressed – and more than that we absolutely can't face the possibility that we might be counted among the oppressors. So we get youngsters to perform our nativity plays. We talk about how magical this season is. We say "Christmas is really for the children." How ... convenient.

But that's not all you find, when you sit in a market square in Delhi and see adults performing the Christmas story in an open-air nativity play. There's more. You see that Christmas is about people struggling, not just politically, but personally. Everywhere you look in the Christmas story you see people clinging on with their fingertips to life, to sanity, to respectability, to hope. Luke's gospel starts with Zechariah, serving in the holy of holies in the Jerusalem temple. It's his big day, and all the other priests are waiting for him to come out, and when he does come out he can't say a word. He's the guy who's been waiting all his life for this moment in the limelight, and when it comes he fluffs his lines. Then there's Elizabeth, who's waited all her life to have a baby, and it's never come. Adulthood for her has been overshadowed by the monthly disappointments and the social stigma of childlessness. She's got no career to throw herself into: she's simply defined by what she's not. Being defined by what you're not is the essence of poverty.

Then there's Mary. She's got a different personal crisis. She's pregnant and she's clinging to a far-fetched story of who the father is. If you believe that one, you'll believe anything. It's hard enough finding yourself with an unexpected and unwelcome pregnancy in our own culture. Imagine the shame and fear for Mary, in a time when stoning for adultery was not unknown. As for Joseph, consider his humiliation. He's betrothed to this young woman, full of grace, and he thinks he's the luckiest man alive: and then he's made to feel a complete fool – and a heartbroken one at that.

Think for a moment about how large a role shame plays in our culture and in your own life. Shame is crushing, horrifying, terrifying. We'll do almost anything to avoid the searchlight of humiliation. Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph are all in different ways facing up to the reality of shame. At the same time they're dealing with professional failure, personal disappointment, genuine fear, and heart-breaking hurt. Maybe you're in one or more of those places tonight. If so, you're in good company.

And even the minor characters in the story are out of their depth. Consider the innkeeper in Bethlehem, trying to accommodate all those extra visitors. He knows what it means to be overwhelmed at work. Consider the soldiers whom Herod sent out to slaughter the innocents. They know what it means to be in a crisis of conscience and to have no respect but plenty of fear for the orders of their boss. Consider the chief priests and scribes whom Herod calls in to explain this rumor of the birth of the messiah. They're torn between their longing for the redemption of Israel and their social and economic loyalty to a corrupt regime. Everyone in the story is at a personal crossroads.

The danger of getting adults to perform the nativity story in a fragile emotional environment like downtown Delhi, drenched with beggars, smells, noise, and smog, is that Christmas brings us face to face with the personal crises of our lives. The Christmas story's teeming with personal grief, unresolved longings, uncomfortable secrets, shabby compromises, intense fears, social humiliation, and aching hurts. We don't want to be reminded of these things at Christmas. The whole point of the holidays is to get together with people with whom you can ignore such things for a weekend, and if not be merry, at least eat and drink and enjoy one another for a while.

We don't want to think about our own grief and shame, and we certainly don't want to dwell on ways in which our insensitivity or selfishness might be making other's hurts and pain more intense than they already are. So... we get youngsters to perform our nativity plays. We talk about how magical this season is. We say "Christmas is really for the children." How convenient. How... safe.

But that's still not all. When you see adults performing a nativity play, not for their grandparents' camera-shots but in order genuinely to inhabit the story and make it their own, you see people not just suffering, not just struggling, but also *searching*. Look at the wise men. They were scouring the heavens for truth, for meaning, for wisdom, for hope. They took the best science of their day and the courage of their traveling companions and followed the star.

Look at the shepherds. They were isolated, cold and frightened, out on the hillside where they couldn't keep the ritual food laws and the only action was a dangerous animal appearing with an appetite for woolly sheep or maybe a taste for burlapped shepherd. But they were looking to the heavens too, for hope, for peace, for redemption, for glory. Look at Simeon and Anna in the temple for baby Jesus' presentation after 40 days. They'd spent their whole lives watching and waiting for the consolation of Israel.

Most of all think of St John the Evangelist, writing his gospel, explaining how this tiny baby was the word that was from the beginning, was tonight made flesh; and how we have beheld his glory, full of grace and truth. John's searching because he's telling us who Jesus is, what it means that the logic of the universe is encapsulated in this tiny child; but he's also pondering why the savior was rejected by his own people, why the messiah's coming didn't signal the end of the world, and how evil can abide in the face of such overwhelming goodness.

These are profound searchings, deep ponderings, echoing yearnings. They encourage us to name and explore the edges of our own faith, and commitments, and convictions, and questions. But we don't want to do that at Christmas. The nativity story's full of people searching, people yearning, people wanting to believe there's more than just appearances and surviving and making a living and staying cheerful. But we don't want those grown-up things. The whole point is to keep it simple: eat, exchange gifts, and see loved ones. Maybe watch some TV or get some fresh air.

We don't want to think about the great purpose of God in creating and redeeming us, in being with us in Jesus and calling us to be with Jesus in hunger and sickness and imprisonment and on the cross. And we certainly don't want to listen to the searchings of other peoples, faiths or cultures. So... we find a way to keep things unchallenging and sentimental. We get youngsters to perform our nativity plays. We talk about how magical this season is. We say "Christmas is really for the children." How convenient. How much less demanding than having to think about it all.

Don't get me wrong – I think there's plenty of good reasons to get children to perform nativity pageants. Really. It's good for them to learn the story. It's great for them literally to walk a few steps in the clothes of a shepherd or a teenage mother. It's terrific for grown-ups to gaze on the innocence of childhood, and, in so doing, rediscover the wonder of the star, the angels, and the baby. Best of all, it may get the adults in touch with the ways the apparently innocent children may not be simply innocent at all but in fact may be suffering, struggling, and searching too, and in the process making the Christmas story their very own.

But be careful. Think again about that nativity play in Delhi. Reflect on the way those grown-ups were in touch with the suffering in this story, the discrimination in their own culture, the political oppression in their own lives. Think about the way those grown-ups were in touch with the struggling in this story, the disappointment, distress, and despair in their own lives, and the lives of those around them. Think about the way those grown-ups were in touch with the searching in this story, the unresolved questions of faith, the yearning of people aching for truth, longing for meaning, waiting for hope, reaching out for God.

After all, that's what it means to be a grown-up – to suffer, to struggle, and to search. And then go back and recognize how convenient it is that we make this story for and about children. Because deep down we don't want to see the suffering, we don't want to face the struggling, we don't want to name the searching. We don't really want to be grown-ups.

In the end the good news of Christmas is just this. God, made fully known in Jesus Christ, is with us, in all our suffering, struggling, and searching. Beloved friends, Christmas isn't really for the children. It's for you.