

“Light the Path

Last Sunday I attended a Service of Baptism for my fourth grandchild. It was a very different experience. First, I wasn't doing it (I had not only baptized my own children, but also my grand-daughter last year at this time). Second, it was in a Roman Catholic Church—my daughter-in-law is a devote Catholic. Third, I had not attended a Roman Catholic Mass since I attended Notre Dame University almost forty years ago. A different experience on three counts.

I entered the church and from memory dipped my fingers in the holy water and crossed myself. I walked to the front of the church to sit in the front pew with my son and his family. I almost genuflected before taking my seat but wasn't sure if my knees were up to it, so I sat down and immediately picked up the misselet to guide me through the service for 'Holy Family Sunday', noted the two hymn book titles so that I would pick up the correct one when the hymns were announced. Then I sat back peacefully, content that I would not stand out as a total stranger in their midst.

The sanctuary was familiar—Crucifix dominating the front wall, a statue of Mary on the right, Joseph on the left. A large alter front and centre, a paschal candle, a baptismal font, a small lectern (no pulpit) and in front of the alter was a crèche with the Holy family (Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus), a few shepherds with their sheep, a cow, a donkey, two camels and four wise men.

Four wise men? I looked again in case a shepherd got misplaced, but no—there were four wise men. My mind started racing, maybe I didn't know as much about the Catholic Church as I thought. Everyone knows there are only three. Perhaps the fourth was Artaban, the fourth wise man, from the story by Henry Van Dyke. Couldn't be—Van Dyke was a Presbyterian clergyman.

Perhaps they knew that the Bible doesn't actually say there are three wise men, it mentions three types of gifts, but doesn't actually give a number of wise men.

So there I sat through the liturgy, the baptism, the homily, the hymns wondering about the fourth wise man. So after the service I had to ask. I had to know about this sacred mystery that I was in the dark about. I went up to the priest and said, "I'm intrigued that your nativity has four wise men." In humility I waited to be inducted into a sacred mystery. He looks at me and says, "I really don't know, I just call him the camel guy."

Another Roman Catholic priest (actually former priest) John Dominic Crossan points out that the nativity accounts in Matthew and Luke are a "parabolic overture." That is they are made up stories. They're fiction. But these stories are not pulp fiction—they are parables. A parable is a deliberately made up story that packs a theological punch. Gospel parables are told to turn your understanding of the world upside down.

Matthew follows the formula for fiction writing; the advents of noble births have dreams, prophecies and celestial signs to foretell the event. So Joseph dreams, Isaiah prophecies and there is a star.

But it is at this point that Matthew gives us a hint of the end of the story. Here is the end— "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" (Matthew 28:18-20)

The hint is that this child to be born is not simply a saviour for the Hebrew people but also for the gentiles—the whole world. The magi from the east meant gentiles from Iraq, Iran and India.

The not too subtle message is that no nation can know peace and justice unless there is peace and justice for all

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nations. True peace does not come with the slaughter of innocent children, the power of one nation over another or the hoarding of wealth. Peace comes through justice. A simple message that we still don't get.

If we follow tradition after the twelfth day of Christmas we take down our trees and put away our ornaments, and the messages of peace on Earth go back into storage until next year. And the world goes back to the ways of violence—in Israel, Afghanistan, Iraq, Rwanda, India, Canada, all in the vain believe that war and violence will bring peace.

So what appeared in the sky above Bethlehem that first Christmas 2,000 years ago was an early, distant warning that said, you can never achieve peace on Earth through victory—only through justice. The path is lit, the only question that remains is, will we follow?