

Second Sunday of Advent, Year C

Baruch 5:1-9

Ps 125:1-6

Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11

Luke 3:1-6

Listen again to the very formal way that St Luke set the scene in our Gospel reading today:

In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the lands of Ituraea and Trachonitis, Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the pontificate of Annas and Caiaphas the word of God came to John son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

All of this historical context may seem very incidental to the story, and we might be inclined to skim right over it and get to the interesting stuff – but I'm arguing that it reveals something very significant.

Now, there are a number of spiritual systems that trade primarily in poetry and myth and legend, and these literary devices are used to convey their primary significance. And this is perfectly fine – there is indeed much of spiritual and human benefit that can be gleaned from reading myths and legends. They can be great fun, and they often impart lessons of considerable depth.

However, it must be emphasised that Christianity is *not* another mythic system. It is an historical religion, that makes very concrete historical claims. And if those claims are wrong, Christianity falls apart. It's been said that we're not so much a religion of the book (as much as we do love the book) as we are a religion of a Person – so it's pretty important for us, for instance, that he really did exist.

Now, history—as you would know—is a rather inexact science. It's not something that we can independently verify the way we can a physics experiment, for example. I can't do a lab experiment to confirm that the First Fleet landed in Sydney in 1788, or to verify that Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC. Our knowledge of these facts is dependent upon the testimony of historical witnesses, which can seem rather imprecise compared with the methods of the hard sciences.

As a result of this, even some theologians have essentially tried to turn Christianity into yet another mythic system – to draw from it many of the same general themes that can be found in the myths and legends. However, the founding texts of our religion simply do not allow for this interpretation. The first Christians were

intensely interested in the historicity of what they were describing and preaching about.

So for instance, instead starting “once upon a time”, our Gospel began today began “during this year of the reign of this emperor, while this guy was king of Judea, and these guys were high priest”. That’s about as far from “once upon a time” as you can get. And incidentally, all of the people he mentions there can be independently verified as historical figures. Or think of the genealogies that are used towards the start of Matthew and Luke’s Gospels. “Jesus’ earthly parents were Mary and—so it was thought—Joseph. Joseph’s father was named Jacob. Jacob’s father was Matthan. His father was this guy. His father was that guy... and so on and so forth.” Again, setting real historical context.

Now, we must concede that the histories told in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, do not always adhere to the strict standards of how present-day historians go about their craft. And that’s because the writers weren’t so much interested in the nuts and bolts of the historical record for its own sake, but were primarily interested in what *God was doing* within history.

The Gospel writers would have been very familiar with the genres of myth and legend. And yet throughout they go out of their way to note that this isn’t what they were writing, but rather that their Gospels are historical biographies.

Why is this important?

Mythic tales can be very beautiful, and often impart valuable psychological insights among other things. But they are always susceptible to the charge that they are wishful thinking – that someone is making these things up because wouldn’t it be great if life was like this.

In contrast, the Gospel writers are adamant that they’re not just making this up, but that something *happened*. In fact, something so strange and unexpected happened, that it changed *everything*. The very word “Advent” comes from the Latin term “adventus”, which means an arrival. Someone *arrived* on the scene two thousand years ago, and he went on to change everything.

The reason history matters to the Bible is that it is the account of God intervening *in history*, to reverse the usual course of history. History is in many ways the long, tragic account of human folly and wickedness. Empires rise and empires fall, and countless human lives are cast asunder in the process. Round and round it goes, the never-ending cycle of human misery.

But in Jesus, something *utterly new* breaks into human history. Something utterly new, and something very good. That's why we call it "Good News". God has interrupted the usual flow of things, and has made a new world.

Here's but one example to leave you with. Luke establishes his setting by noting who were the secular and religious leaders of the day—which were the sort of people that the historians of his time spent all their time writing about. The "important people". But that's just the setting. When the Word of God finally arrives in the Gospel passage we heard, it didn't come to any of these high and mighty people. No, it comes to wild ol' John, son of Zechariah, out in the desert. About as unlikely a person and unlikely a place as you could think of for God to stake his claim.

And, of course, the same is true of the Christmas story itself. The narrative does not focus on the emperor or the king or the high priest, but on this poor, unknown couple who end up seeking shelter in a manger. All throughout the Bible, and particularly in the New Testament, it is the little people—the heretofore unknowns of history—whom God chooses as his instruments.

The first will be last and the last will be first. And to give away the ending, it is a poor man executed outside the walls of Jerusalem who would be the Saviour of the world.

And so the message this Advent is what it was two thousand years ago. The Lord has truly come. He has really arrived in history. And *nothing* will be the same again.