

Dying to Grow and The Point of It All

Christmas can be the time substance gets lost beneath frantic frivolities. Pastors, vicars, and ordinary church folk enter into the annual tradition of trying to talk about deep things (incarnation, salvation, Jesus!) without sounding twee or spoiling the mince pies and mulled wine.



It's not just a Christmas predicament, though. The same thing is there, more subtly, throughout the rest of the year. Church life is *always* full of frantic frivolities. There may be less tinsel, but the dynamic remains. We can lurch from Sunday to Sunday. The buzz of activities can be a pervasive background. Our Christmas "church gigs" have an intensity about them; we invest in them, advertise them, and are glad when we are rewarded with the right sort of numbers. But that only amplifies what is already present: our drive to perform and get growing results. Throughout the year, in the midst of the mist of religious supply and demand, we try to talk about deep things, without sounding twee or spoiling things.

I'm not sure it's working that well.

I know I have become wary of activity and busyness.

It's not that I'm into passivity or quietism. I rejoice in the sense of *flow* when a community acts, seeks, worships together. When brothers and sisters are in unity and purpose... well, the presence of Christ is almost tangible. Even as I write this, I can hear the sounds and smell the smells wafting up the stairs from the meal that is being prepared in our downstairs church hall. It's an excellent *activity* with a sense of flow, a weekly expression of hospitality and care, and one of the

highlights of my week.

But I also know what it's like when church activities are not like that: when doing is about duty and not much more, and movement is a going around in circles, a spinning of our wheels. This is when we do things *only* because we did them last year. This is when new opportunities are met with a pang of cynicism: "We've done that, we tried that, that just feels like yet more work." When we take things deep and try to reconnect with the point of it all, suddenly the words sound hollow, disconnected, echo-like. We drown in the shallows.

When it's like that, **it's worth listening to Jesus.**

Lately I've been moved to lay aside all my carefully curated church growth strategies and reflect on the words of Jesus in Matthew 16.

Famously, **he has his own church growth church strategy.** It is founded on Peter's confession of Jesus as Lord: "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and **on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.***"

More infamously, Peter tries to take control of this building project. He refuses to countenance the thought of the Messiah laying down his life, and counsels the King of Kings to choose a different path. As Jesus points out, he is moved by "human concerns." Jesus rebukes him and includes this injunction: "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.***"

In Luke 17, the same words are echoed. This time, it is not about the *foundations* of the church, but the finishing touches at the point of our Lord's return: "*It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who*

*is on the housetop, with possessions inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife! **Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.***"

How's that for a church growth strategy? **Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it!**

This has led me to two conclusions:

Firstly, this is a key to our frantic activism, at Christmas time or any time else. So often, we are scrambling to not "lose our life;" we do things to keep from demise. Take any church activity as an example: a Sunday gathering, a carol service, a bible study, an advertising campaign, a diocesan restructure. If it exists as an attempt to justify our existence, prove our relevance, deflect our decline... then we are full of "human concerns" and we are in the way. Often the best thing to do is to cease that activity, or shut something down.

But if those same church activities exist to give ourselves away, for the sake of Jesus... they flow and bring forth life. They become *deep*, acts of sacrificial worship, reflections of God's grace, of love to the local community, of sharing our very selves one with another. They encapsulate something precious, the essence of the Kingdom of God.

The same activities can either be a clinging to life (and losing it), or a giving of life for the sake of Christ (and finding it). This is the paradox of Christian leadership towards true church growth: How do you build yourself up by giving yourself away? How do you generate something without slipping into empty activism? My thoughts have taken me here:

Secondly, it lifts our eyes towards the ends, not the means. The big word to describe this is "teleological" – from the Greek word *telos* meaning "end" or "point" or "goal." We need

to be *teleological* and look to our end, to the point of it all.

The writer to the Hebrews has the sense of it when he exhorts us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:1-12). Paul has a similar motivation when he “sets his eyes upon the prize” (Philippians 3:14). Both speak of activity and perseverance, but the vision is towards the goal. **The goal is Jesus.**

We need a teleological approach to *mission*. When we think about mission, we quickly go to the activities (evangelistic activities, community engagement etc.) or desired outcomes (increased attendance, more activity). This is a focus on the *means*. **The Scriptures look first to Jesus.**

In Hebrews 2 or 1 Corinthians 15, for instance, we see the goal, the *telos*, of mission. It is *not*, firstly, about church numbers, or even social justice, it is about the glorification of Jesus. *Everything* flows from that. “He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet,” Paul says. Psalm 8 is used in Hebrews 2 to say much the same thing about a “Son of Man” who is “made a little a lower than the angels” only to be “crowned with glory and honour” with “everything under his feet.” We find justice, we find salvation, we find grace in that truth, and nowhere else.

This gives the focus of mission. The point of mission is the rule of Christ, the honour of Christ, the glorification of Jesus. **True worship is mission. True mission is worship.** This is the point. This is the goal. This is our *telos*. If we don’t do it in the name of Jesus, we will end up doing it in the name of ourselves; we will end up clinging to our life, and so losing it.

For sure, those mission activities are not a waste. Delve into Hebrews 2 and you will see them find their place in the light

of Christ's supremacy: Jesus is glorified when his people glorify him. This happens when his people are sanctified and set free from the power of sin and death. Therefore, evangelism and outreach are a means of our mission. Pastoral care and discipleship activities are a means of our mission. Confession and repentance and contrition are a means of our mission. But they are, by definition, not an end in and of themselves. But be aware, we can do all these things in a self-facing frantic way, and so lose ourselves.

Our diocese happens to face an uncertain 2020. It's not alone; the pressure to perform, and survive, and to save ourselves is mounting on the declining Western church. We can cling to ourselves, or we can "lose ourselves" in the truth of Jesus, reigning over all things. We give ourselves to him. We trust him. We repent. We worship. We adore. We devote. We give ourselves to that end. We give ourselves to that goal. We give ourselves and so find ourselves... in Jesus, our Lord.

Merry Christmas.

**Q&A: Does it matter that we
tamper with the nativity
story, the account of God**

with us?

Off-Line asks:



I've been pondering... the extra-scriptural nature of our (i.e. Christian) nativity.

...I know that JC was in all likelihood not born in 1AD or Year 0. That for shepherds to be in the field at night it would have been Sept/Oct not mid-winter and snow on the ground. A little like "Queens birthday" it doesn't fuss me that we don't celebrate on the right date. However it nags at me that so much of what we have in our heads, and on shelves as Nativity scenes at this time of year is just nonsense.

- *Inn/Guestroom – Luke uses each (Samaritan, and Passover prep) so why do we translate it as Inn in the Christmas account. No "room" at the "inn" instead of no space in the guest room.*
- *There is NO stable! There is a manager.*
- *There are shepherds*
- *There are no magi on the night – when they do arrive there are 3 gifts not 3 people – the seem to come some weeks/months perhaps year later.*

Does it matter that we pollute/corrupt/tamper/supplement the account of God with us? What other piece of scripture would we be so careless with?

However, even having decided that you want a biblical nativity, how do you get from where we are to somewhere scriptural?

It's an awesome question and a fraught topic. It reminded me of an overheard conversation at this year's Christmas pageant in Hobart – "What! The churches are even sticking their nose in for this!" Groan.

In the popular mind the nativity story is becoming not only increasingly inaccurate but increasingly irrelevant. I have made more than one conversation in which, having explained a theological point about God revealing himself to us, the light suddenly dawns as lines are drawn from this gospel reality to Mary and Joseph to Christmas etc.

Nevertheless the nativity story is there along with Prancer and Bitzen and Rudolph and tinsellitis and the North Pole and the whole Claus family. Although emphasising it runs the risk of being accused of being Grinch-like. Bah humbug.

While it's easy to accuse the Santa cultus on Coca Cola, the point you make about diminishing meaningfulness of contemporary nativity I think derives more from Victorian & Georgian England, the conceptual inculcations of the KJV (yes, "inn"), and the tradition of holding a "nativity play" in which pleasing the children (and finding parts for them) pre-empts accuracy.

And yes, the whole traditional nativity is completely inaccurate. Google is your friend in getting the details, but here are a couple of semi-decent links:

- <http://web.cloudbow.com/blog/?p=5>
- <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/how-historically-accurate-is-the-traditional-nativity-437743>

But the substantive question is: should we resist this "tampering" with the story?

And my answer is "yes." In fact, it is "of course." Chief among the tasks of proclaiming God's word is the so-called "joining of the two horizons" – the original word spoken to

its original context is applied sensibly as a word within our context. The only way to do this well is to get our head around the historical facts.

Indeed, the historical reality of the nativity is a much more powerful story: the witnessing shepherds *are* socio-economic rejects, the “no place in the inn” is not about a petulant innkeeper but about the limits of familial (covenant family!) hospitality. I have a friend who does midwifery work in third world countries providing sanitary equipment for expecting mothers who would otherwise give birth within the mud and mildew of their tents. Take away the Victorian romance you have a screaming teenager giving birth in full-to-the-brim home amidst the smell, noise, and refuse of animals and peasants. God with us indeed, God with us at our most utterly utterly deprived.

So what to do? Some random suggestions.

1. Tell the real story, as best we can. In conversation, in preaching, etc.
2. Engage with, but don't lambast, the Christian romantics. This is a “just because I don't have a Christmas tree doesn't mean you shouldn't” type consideration.
3. Steer our nativity presentations away from the false and towards the correct. Again, this can be done offensively, or subversively and gently. I've seen nativity scenes constructed and beautifully carved that are abstract and symbolic and take you past the fluff to dwell on the reality. I've seen traditional scenes rearranged – the wise men placed further away as if on a journey for instance, proclamations from the angels done in *full* “Peace on earth and good will to those upon whom his favour rests.”
4. Emphasise the important stuff. This isn't about cute babies, it's about God's humbling of himself to lead an estranged people. This doesn't mean being theologically nerdy. The Big Picture Bible is one that does a great

job of telling a children's story about the coming of
God's "Forever King"

5. Encourage people to read Matthew and Luke.

So nothing particularly revolutionary. Just steady as she
goes solid homiletics for the whole of life really.

Blessings for the New Year.