

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her king!”

It's Christmas morning and we are to “Sing to the Lord a new song for he has done marvelous things”. Somehow it always feels like a new day on Christmas, a new time to begin again. A time when we can celebrate the baby and all that is hopeful and joyful about the presence of new life and this baby that represents the culmination of the hopes of Israel and the people of God that the true messiah would save the world.

For many people the expectations for this day are high, expectations raised by the frenetic gaiety around us and heavy emphasis on families and fellowship but sadly our reality does not always match our expectations. Moreover it is all too easy to miss the joy of Christmas present when we focus on remembering happier times or those who are no longer with us and that of course is the danger of the sentimental or especially incarnational side of Christmas. This tendency to focus on family for Christmas is a hook, which is not to deny the sadness, or real loss when these are not present, or no longer present, or were never present in the first place. That was the idea behind developing the Blue Christmas Service to acknowledge the very real pain that is often present in the middle of all the joy. But if we can reframe Christmas as a time to begin anew, to move from the past and into the great cosmic present and the promise of God's Word, well then we can also see it as a reason to rejoice and to give thanks in the here and now as well as in what the future promises to bring. But this means we have to move beyond the Hallmark Christmas with which we are bombarded on every side, to move beyond our memories, and it is John's gospel that can help us to do so.

There are four gospels and four different versions of how we are to understand who Jesus is and how he came to be.

Matthew starts with the genealogy going back to Abraham because that is what supports the legitimacy of Jesus ministry - and what helps those who came later understand why Joseph was willing to accept a fiancé who was already pregnant with a child not of his own. Joseph will experience the intervention by the Holy Spirit, not only to accept his fiancé but to protect the infant Jesus first taking him to Egypt and then bringing him back to Nazareth. Obviously God is playing an active role in protecting his son.

It is Luke who anchors us firmly in the incarnation of Jesus, the very human relationships of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Elizabeth and Mary, and Mary and Joseph trudging to Bethlehem, the grubby shepherds, and the baby. And yes, we need that because that Jesus became incarnate, to make known to us the love that is in God for all humankind. Luke will relate Jesus' birth to many prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures and will continue to do so throughout Jesus' ministry. Luke's Jesus is the savior for all humankind.

Mark knocks the wind out of us by beginning with Jesus' ministry and the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. He has no time for babies, or for situating Jesus in the history of Israel. The important thing for Mark will be Jesus' role in challenging the powers-that-be, the earthy powers of the religious authorities and the demonic forces that threaten to destabilize the world and his willingness to die to destroy their power.

All three of these evangelists are anchored in their human perspectives about Jesus but John, well John tells us the story from the perspective of God.

John tells us that the arrival of Jesus marks a new beginning. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the word was God, He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being with him..." We should be used to new beginnings by now: Advent for the Church. New Year's for the calendar and our understanding of historical time, and September, the start of the school year and so ingrained that much of our secular programming depends on it. But this new beginning is different. This is the anniversary of the new beginning of our life as *Children of God*. Baby Jesus is one thing but it is our birthday as well. Jesus became incarnate for us. "...to all who received him, who believed in his name he gave the power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." So yes, Jesus was present at creation and is the instrument of creation and now as John tells the story, as incarnate, as the Word made flesh, Jesus is the instrument of restoration. This is the reason we celebrate and it has nothing to do with Christmas trees, or Santa Claus, or even chestnuts roasting by the open fire. Now all of those things are well and good, but they are not, to use a popular cliché "the reason for the season!"

John tells us why the story of Jesus is important because in John, in John we learn what the coming of Jesus is going to mean. The cosmos is exploding with the glory of God, the God who so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

We have been saved by him. We have become children of God through him and this is the reason to thank, this is the reason to spread the good news, to "Go tell it on the mountain" to rejoice and let everyone know that "Jesus Christ is born!"

Amen