

**Christmas 1**  
**29/12/2013**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 63:7-9**

**Psalm 148**

**Hebrews 2:10-18**

**Matthew 2:13-23**

### **The God who re-stories us**

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There are on our shelves at home very large number of children's videos and DVDs – the likes of Disney and DreamWorks and that kind of thing. A favourite among these is *Shrek*, which is basically a beauty-and-the-beast story, but with a few extra twists.

Shrek is the name of a grumpy but otherwise fairly good-souled ogre, who is forced by the evil Lord Farquaad, ruler of Duloc, to go on a journey to rescue the beautiful princess Fiona, whom Farquaad intends to marry. One of the twists, however, is that Princess Fiona has been cursed, and while she is beautiful by day she turns into an ogress at night; the beauty and the beast are actually bound together in one person – and it is the one who looks beautiful. This she keeps secret.

Along the journey back to Duloc after the rescue, Shrek and Fiona find themselves falling in love. Fiona, however is bound by the need to release herself from the curse, which can only happen at true love's first kiss. She presumes that, since Lord Farquaad instigated her rescue, he is her true love. Shrek is bound by the fact that Fiona is, as far as he knows, human and not ogre. Finally resolving that he loves Fiona regardless, Shrek crashes the wedding. Lord Farquaad, realising that they love each other, mocks Shrek for his ugliness and Fiona for loving what is ugly, and orders them to be taken away. Shrek and Fiona kiss and, because it is love's first kiss, Fiona's curse is lifted and she is beautiful again. The twist is that she takes the form of the ogress – that which Shrek would love more. And the two live happily ever after, as you might imagine!

In the traditional beauty-and-the-beast story, it is the beast who is transformed into the handsome prince, who then marries the beautiful princess. A popular animated musical version of the traditional story was made by Disney a few years ago, prior to the making of *Shrek*. The interesting point is, however, that the makers of *Shrek* took the transformation scene of the Disney film and mimicked it in their own film, but with the opposite outcome. Whereas in both scenes a "beast" is levitated and spun around and transformed by the lifting of the curse in a circle of brilliant light, in the traditional version what descends is the handsome prince, while in *Shrek* what descends is not the beautiful princess but the ogress.

The effect was, if you had seen both films, that *Shrek* casts a powerful judgement on the assumptions about beauty in the traditional story. You would probably still get the point if you'd not seen the Disney version, but to recognise the link between the scenes in the two movies makes the critique of the depth of our assumptions about beauty all the more pointed. *Shrek* sort of says "no" to the *Beauty and the Beast*, and it's the interaction between the two which gives the later movie much of its grunt.

Now, you're free to forget most of that straightaway, except for the technique of plagiarising what has gone before in order to make a comment on it, or on something else. For this is exactly the kind of thing which is happening in our gospel reading this morning with its account of the Holy Family's flight to Egypt, and return to Nazareth. We can read the stories "cold", and understand that this or that particular thing happened. But, to get the point, or the "joke", of what Matthew is saying you have to know earlier stories of the people of Israel because, in telling his story, Matthew is drawing on what the people already know, in order to tell who this child Jesus is.

If we miss this engagement with the earlier events and sayings, there is a danger of romanticising the stories, and turning them into mere facts about the events of Jesus' early life. Matthew's intention is not really just to tell us that all these amazing and terrifying things happened. More important are the links with what has happened before in the past. It is as if history is repeating itself, although with a difference.

And so Matthew tells us that Jesus and his family were forced to go to Egypt, not because he thinks that it's something we'd like to know, or need to know so that we'll be nicer to refugees in our own time. The point is that when Jesus and his family come back out of Egypt, it is just like when the Hebrews were set free from slavery. It is not the Holy Family's itinerary we are to note but the *meaning* of their movements. In this way Matthews shows us how Jesus is like Israel itself – loved by God as a parent loves her child, and "saved" from Egypt as Israel was.

Matthew also tells us about Herod's rage and the killing of the young boys. Again, this is not so that we'll be more sympathetic to people who suffer these kinds of atrocities. Matthew is more interested in drawing parallels to the birth of Moses as a well-known previous occasion when exactly the same thing happened. In order to kill the rumoured deliverer of the Hebrews, the Pharaoh had all the young Hebrew boys killed, although Moses escaped; Herod does the same thing. And so in Matthew's telling of the story, what was known before happens again, but with a new twist: *Jesus* is now cast as a new Moses.

This morning's reading finished with Jesus ending up in Nazareth. Once more, this is not given as mere information. Important for Matthew is that he is then able to call Jesus a "Nazarene", which would have reminded Jews of the time about the Old Testament order of Nazorites, men specially dedicated to serve God.<sup>1</sup>

(The story of the star of Bethlehem, and the gifts the astrologers bring, are also told not merely because they are actually supposed to have happened, but because it has an important Old Testament precedent, but that's next week's reading!).

Matthew is saying to those to whom he writes: "You have heard all of this – this is your heritage – now know it in its true meaning in Jesus".

The repeated history is not quite the same, of course. When the old stories and images are revisited, they're given a new twist, and their meaning is intensified. So, for example, there's an element of irony – something unexpected – which creeps in this new enacting of the stories: whereas in the original story it was a "foreign" power holding the Hebrews captive, or killing the children, here it's the royal representative

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the precise reference Matthew intends to make to the Old Testament is not clear, as there is no "He shall be called a Nazorean" line to be found there. The reference to the Nazorites is one possibility (cf. the birth of Samson, Judges 13.5); another is a play on the Hebrew word "neser" in Isaiah 11.1 ("A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch [neser] shall grow out of his roots..."). In any case, the point is the resonance with what has gone before.

of the people of God himself; the people of God are shown to quite capable of the inflicting the evil they themselves have suffered at the hands of others. It's not merely a matter of "once more, folks"; but a re-enactment of the old stories which digs much deeper than the original did.

Now, if you're telling a story, you don't have to do it in this way. Tales which begin with the familiar "once upon a time" just get going, introducing the characters as they need to in order to relate some happening or teach some moral. But it isn't just accidental that Matthew tells his story in this way rather than in one of the other ways he might have told it. He tells the story this way because this way of telling *reflects how God actually enters our lives*. When God enters into our lives, it's not as one more piece of information. Christian discipleship is not about learning a lot of facts about God, in the same way that we might learn facts about history or mathematics in school.

When God enters our lives, he takes the things we already think we know – our stories, our histories, our hopes and dreams – and makes them knowledge of something different. When Matthew tells the story of Jesus, he is doing what Jesus himself had done earlier, saying "you've heard it was said...but now *I* say to you..." (Matthew 5). In this way Jesus took something from the old law Israel knew, and deepened it, or expanded its scope. Effectively, he says, "You have heard or learned this or that thing, but only *half* heard it, or half learned it, or been given half of what is necessary". In this new way Christ reveals the depth of what was intended, or enacted, in the earlier thing.

The gospel writer Matthew has to do the same, because of the nature of the God-in-Christ he is talking about. What the Jews already knew about themselves was the basis for recognising who Jesus was. Paul spoke once of the difference between looking into a dim mirror (or "through a glass darkly", as the old King James version put it), and seeing "face to face". What we know of ourselves apart from God-in-Christ is just such a "dim vision"; it is *Jesus* who confronts us with the deeper truth of who we are and who God is, the deeper meaning our stories and God's story.

The invitation which Matthew issues to us is not that we simply believe the remarkable stories of the events of the first Christmas, as improbable as some of them might seem to us. More importantly, Matthew invites us to allow ourselves – our stories, our histories, our hopes and dreams – to be reinterpreted in the light of this one, Jesus son of Mary, the new Israel, the new Moses, the holy one of God. Jesus is given as the key to unlocking our stories, recasting what has happened to us and reshaping what might yet come of us.

The presence of the crucified Christ, which the Easter church celebrates each Sunday, is an invitation to allow ourselves to be re-shaped and re-modelled in this way. Such a re-modelling casts our past not as a thing which limits us but as something which, in this this God's hands, can become our liberation. It casts our future not as uncertain and potentially threatening but as the place where we will meet God, and so as sheer opportunity and possibility.

What we have and are now is where God begins, but he will *end* in a surprising and enlivening filling-out of who we are, making of our lives in Christ the very presence of God.

Christmas is an invitation: *Open yourselves to this one*, allow his story to become the true meaning and goal of your own, and begin being the people of love and hope you were created to be. By the grace of God, may his people willingly take up that offer. Amen.

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