

Colossians 3:1-10
Luke 2:1-7

Nowhere else to be

On our bookshelf at home there is a book with the rather intimidating title, *1001 Movies You Must Watch Before You Die!* I've decided to rise to the challenge, although it is quite possible that I've left my run a little late!

An advantage of resting in a discipline like that – if movie-watching can be called a discipline! – is that it forces you to watch and think about a lot of things you wouldn't normally consider if you simply followed your personal tastes. The range of "must watch" flicks begins in 1902, crosses national, cultural and aesthetic boundaries, and covers every genre – at least those types that might have appeared in a local cinema near you at some time or other.

Yet, for all their variation across time, genre and style, most films have a common structure which runs something like this. The first thing which happens in the story is the *placement* of the central character. It might be young, innocent Maria on a mountaintop marvelling that the hills are alive with the sound of music. It might be the not so young or innocent Indiana Jones, realising the dream of finding a legendary archaeological artefact. Or it might be plucky Sidney Prescott, living a more or less happy, middle-class teenage life.

The narrative flow then moves to the *displacement*. Maria falls in love with Captain von Trapp and his children, and must contend with a jealous baroness, with her own sense of call to the convent and with the Nazis. Or all the boobytraps fire and send Indiana fleeing from crushing boulders through winding tunnels, and later from more Nazis. Or Sidney takes a phone call and finds herself relentlessly pursued by the murderous Ghostface.

In each case, the story begins with a placement, followed by a displacement, before the struggle of the heroes and heroines to find their way back to their proper equilibrium. And the bulk of the story is that struggle against all odds and seemingly insurmountable obstacles, climbing every mountain, fording every stream, until the dreamed-for peace is found.

This is the comedic arc the vast majority of our stories follow because most of our stories are comedies – not necessarily in the sense of making us laugh but in following that narrative flow of equilibrium, descent and restoration.

I bring all this to mind today because I want to draw your attention to a small detail in our gospel reading this morning over which we pass pretty quickly, usually noticing the noun but not the verb: "and Mary placed him in a manger". We know about the manger, and the irony often noted here: that the one who is called "king" has such a lowly cot. But if we shift our attention from the *manger* to what Mary *does*, we seem to see again the dynamic by which our books and movies work: Mary *lays, places*, Jesus in a manger. This is his "equilibrium" point, the beginning of his story point from which the displacement will dislodge him. If we follow the story of Jesus from this beginning to its end, we see something like the usual flow of our stories: from his beginning condition, he descends into conflict, which culminates in the crucifixion, which is then followed by the resurrection.

The story of Jesus, then, looks like all our favourite stories: from high to low, to high again. Jesus “comes down from heaven”, slums it a bit for a while, and then “ascends” again.

Or so it seems. One problem with this way of reading Jesus’ story is that *we* are the slum! And, certainly, the “we” in the story – the people Jesus encounters in his circle of friends, disciples and opponents – scarcely make it easy for him. But on the other hand, we don’t get the sense from the story that Jesus is somehow dropped into a hole and needs to dig himself out, as do Maria, Indiana or Sidney; or Skywalker, Rambo or Ripley; or Harry, Hermione and Ron.

In fact, the story of Jesus is kind of the other way around. The equilibrium in the gospel story is a world in which mangers and mothers and fishermen and priests and kings already all have their place, and into this is placed the *displacing Jesus*. The baby in the manger becomes the threat, the thing which disrupts, the thing to be overcome.

And so, just as the heroine typically tries to fight her way back to the world which made sense, those around Jesus push back, seeking again the balance they had before he dislodged them. And this is why the story leads to the cross.

Jesus’ story, then, is not quite like our other stories. It’s a kind of “reverse” story. In a normal story, the protagonist struggles to get out of the frame, and so to disappear back into normality. But in the gospel, it’s not Jesus who struggles to disappear; it is everyone else. It is *Jesus* who frames *them*, casting them in a particular way from which they seek to escape by pushing him away.

We usually tell our stories to remind each other that there is danger out there, and that this is how to overcome it, how to get back on our feet again. But we don’t see this in the story that flows on from the manger. Jesus’ own placement and displacement are the same thing: he is at home in the world which finally rejects him, and it is this at-home-ness which is so threatening to everyone else. Jesus always acts as if he is where he should be, whereas most of us, most of the time, want to be somewhere else.

We want to be done with where we’re at. We want to be done with our studies, with our dead-end job, our dead-end relationship, or with the in-laws. We want to be done with the too-high expectations and the incompetence. We want to be done with the uncertainty, the ill health, the infirmity, the worry. We want to be done with knowing and seeing all that is wrong with us and our lives together.

As we struggle to find a way out of all such things, we seek to prove to ourselves that our lives are comedies, despite all appearances to the contrary: the real me cannot be here and now but is still to come. I just need to climb out of this displacement, whatever it is.

The child placed in the manger knows nothing of this. What does a swaddled baby care about straw or silk? A gentle song at a warm breast is close enough to heaven. And this doesn’t change as the story unfolds. Mary’s embrace of Jesus becomes the embrace of the one he knows and names as the divine Father. As at his birth so in the full stride of life, Jesus is where he is supposed to be, and so God’s will is done on earth, without waiting for some distant or future heaven to arrive.

We should entertain no sentimentality, then, as we hear of Jesus’ birth, and the manger, and everything else we’ve added to the story ever since. It is not that things start well in the stable and go downhill from there, only finally to end well by the power of God. It is rather that whether he is with cradle or cross or crown (TIS 321), Jesus is always in the right place; there is nowhere else he needs to be. He is in the right place, whether in Mary’s arms, with his disciples, disputing with the scribes, or standing before Pilate.

Jesus is not always in a *comfortable* place, but it is always the right place, a place where he can be *true*.

And so this is the proposal of the baby placed in the manger: that it is better to be in the right place than in a comfortable place. The comfortable fear being uncomfortable again, and those who seek mere comfort will fear its loss if they ever find it. But those who know themselves to be in the right place don't fear anything.

We tell the story of Christmas because it is the beginning of a possibility which might be our own: being fully alive wherever we are, comfortable or not. As Mary places Jesus in the manger, God places him in the world to the part of the world which is always true, wherever it is. The story of Jesus is not comic like the stories we like or tragic like the ones we don't; it is simply full, and true. Jesus has much to do, but he has nowhere else to be.

And God places us in this same way in the manger of the world, to live stories which are neither tragic nor comic, but pressed down and flowing over with truth and life.

Let the message of the God who finds a home among us be the beginning of our finding our home in the world in which we've been placed. For we too have much to do, but nowhere else to be.
