

Psalm 148
Matthew 2:13-23
Hijacking a story

ForeWord

Hijacking a story

One of the favourite family movies at our place over the years has been *Shrek* (2001), which is basically a beauty-and-the-beast story, with a few extra twists.

Shrek is the name of a grumpy but otherwise good-souled ogre, who is forced by the evil Lord Farquaad to rescue the beautiful princess Fiona from a high tower in a dragon-guarded castle somewhere, Fiona being whom Farquaad intends to marry. One of the twists, however, is that Princess Fiona has been cursed: while she is beautiful by day, she turns into an ogress at night. This she keeps secret.

Along the journey back 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 that true love. For his part, 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. Shrek and Fiona kiss and, because it is love's first kiss, Fiona's curse is lifted: she is beautiful again. The twist here is that she takes the form of the ogress – that which Shrek would love all the more. And the two live happily ever after, as the saying goes. Or, at least, they're happy until the crises arise which precipitate several successful sequels.

In the traditional beauty-and-the-beast story, of course, it is the beast who is transformed into the handsome prince, who then marries the beautiful maiden. A popular animated version of the traditional story was made by Disney a decade before *Shrek*. And the *Shrek* movie plays on this, taking the beast-to-human transformation scene of the Disney film and mimicking it, 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 *Shrek* version, what descends is not the beautiful princess but the ogress.

You would probably still get the point if you'd not previously seen the Disney version, but to recognise the link between the scenes in the two movies makes the critique of our assumptions about beauty all the more pointed. *Shrek* says “no” to *Beauty and the Beast*, and it's the interaction between the two which gives the later movie much of its grunt.

Now, feel 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 these stories “cold”, and understand that this or that particular thing happened. But, to get the point, or even the joke, of what Matthew is saying, you have to know earlier stories of old Israel because Matthew is drawing on what the people already know, 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. But Matthew's intention is not simply 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.

Let's, then, pause to hear from Matthew's Gospel...

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: Matthew 2. 13-23)

Word: Proclamation

Once more, with feeling

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. They go to Egypt *so that* they can come back, because when they do, 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 resonance, and so the *meaning*, of their movements. In Matthew's presentation, Jesus is like old 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 well-known birth story of Moses, when exactly the same thing happened. To kill the rumoured deliverer of the Hebrews, the Egyptian Pharaoh had all the young Hebrew boys killed, although Moses escaped; King Herod does the same thing. And so in Matthew's telling of the story, *Jesus* is cast as a new Moses.

And our Gospel 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 may have reminded Matthew's readers of the Old Testament order of Nazirites, men specially dedicated to serve God. (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 Nazirites 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. (And 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 they have an important Old Testament precedent, but that's next week's reading!).

Matthew is saying to those to whom he writes: "You've heard all of this – this is your heritage – the story of Jesus is your very own story".

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 into 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 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 deeper than the original did.

Now, if we're telling a story, we 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 required, 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 our lives, it's not as one more piece of information. Christian discipleship is not about learning a lot of facts about God.

When God enters our lives, the things we already think we know – our stories, our histories, our hopes and dreams – are taken and made knowledge of something different.

But it's not quite that something is added, or that our old knowledge was incomplete. Matthew is seeking to make sense of what otherwise makes no sense. In Jesus, he has encountered something which must be proclaimed, but how? What makes sense of life out of death, the continuing felt presence of the crucified Jesus? The old stories had meaning enough in themselves, but Matthew takes them and applies them to speak about what Jesus now represents. What his readers already knew about themselves becomes the basis for understanding what Jesus is: their story becomes wrapped up in his.

Our story for God's story

But this works both ways. Matthew borrows the old stories to say what Jesus represents. But this changes the old stories in the process. In the case of the scriptural narrative, Matthew's method makes the old stories look a little like prophecies, and this is probably partly how Matthew understood it. But we don't have to commit to an overly simplistic prophecy-fulfilment process here. Perhaps a more accessible reading of this dynamic for today is to see what Matthew does as revealing that our stories are open to God's story. Our stories are steps along the way in God's own story. If Jesus is not *prophesied* by the Old Testament stories, those stories are still useful for understanding him because it is the same God at work before and in Jesus.

And the same applies since then. Faith does not look back 2000 years to an experience constrained by the categories of the time. Jesus is the new Israel, the new Moses, for those to whom those identities are absolutely central. Matthew effectively *colonises* these ideas, borrowing them, hollowing them out and filling them again with Christ. In this way, he makes the history of Israel point to Christ, be oriented towards his appearance.

For us, now, the requirement is not that we become first-century Jews and think about Jesus in the same terms they did. Rather, to come to faith is to begin to see our own stories as the material by which Jesus can be experienced and known. What we have been taught, and have done and suffered, are the basic elements by which Jesus takes shape for us, and so these things become part of Jesus' own story.

Jesus is given as the key to unlocking our own stories, recasting what has happened to us and reshaping what might yet come of us.

The continuing presence of the crucified Christ, which the Easter church celebrates each Sunday, is an invitation to see our lives re-shaped and re-modelled in this way. This is to recast our past not as a thing which limits us but as something which, in this God's hands, can become our liberation and the liberation of others. It casts our future not as uncertain and so 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 God will *end* in a surprising and enlivening filling-out of who we are, making of our lives in Christ the very presence of God, whether we look like a princess or an ogre. For our story to become entwined with the story of Jesus is the transformation of true love's first kiss.

Christmas is an invitation: *Open yourselves to this one*, allow his story to become the true meaning and goal of your own story, and begin being the people of love and hope you were created to be.

This is the gift in Christmas.

Let us receive it, become it, towards our own richer humanity and God's greater glory.
