

Long before Messrs Hallmark and Carlton prettied up the manger, fluffed up the hay and Osh-Koshed Baby Jesus, there was but blood, toil, sweat and tears. No little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay, no lullabies, no halos, no beasts of burden exchanging knowing glances of adoration – but rather this: the cries of a birthing mother piercing the night, an anxious Joseph pacing the courtyard to which he had been banished by an officious midwife, iron pots of heated water lugged from the fire, slopping onto the ground as they went, and someone ripping a bedsheet into bands of cloth. Blood, toil, sweat, and tears. The smells and sounds of birth and hard work and pain. And joy – for tears are bilingual, are they not?, bespeaking both sorrow and joy.

I sometimes think that if we could recover the earthiness of this heavenly event, we might come perceptibly closer to its claim upon our lives. Perhaps what I am longing for is what the biblical scholar Raymond Brown once called “an *adult* Christ at Christmas”. To be honest, “baby Jesus” is way too cute for my needs – and we, with our greeting cards, and crèches, and Christmas carols, have quite possibly created an idyll which is nowhere near warranted by the biblical text. It’s too clean, too simple, too sweet., too happy, too tidy. It makes me want to look under the bed.

And sure enough, all around the edges of this picture-perfect stable are the first signs of a gathering storm (to quote Mr Churchill again).

For this holy child is born under the shadow of a most unholy alliance of power, favouritism, and greed.

To begin with, the Emperor Augustus has called for a census. You only do a census for two reasons. One is so you know who is eligible for military service. This all seems a bit disingenuous, considering that Augustus had proclaimed himself the “Prince of Peace.” So much for the Pax Romana! This puts a completely different spin on the song of the angels, doesn’t it? “Glory to God in the highest, and *peace to God’s people on earth*” -- the infant Jesus is being presented to as the broker of true peace, and in principled opposition to the kind of peace which is secured only by force of violence (even legal violence) or might. This baby might not be quite as cuddly as he looks!

The other reason you do a census is so you can send people their tax forms. It takes only a cursory reading of the gospels to realize that taxation was a hot-button topic for the people. In addition to being gouged for additions to Herod’s already luxurious palace, people faced extortion by tax collectors, who shamelessly lined their own pockets in return for small favours. “Baby Jesus” is going to get in a lot of trouble for pushing back on this issue of taxes. Make no mistake: Luke knows exactly what he is doing when he surrounds the birth of Jesus with hardships brought on by tax policy. How do I know this? Because twenty-one chapters later, when Jesus is brought to trial before Pilate, one of the assembly’s accusations against him is that “we found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor...” (Luke 23.2). I rather suspect it would be easier for us to make this connection between the circumstances of Jesus’ birth and the message he grew up to preach if we hadn’t so effectively romanticized the manger scene.

Joseph, meanwhile, shows himself an obedient son of the Empire. He goes home and announces to his pregnant wife, now late into the third trimester of pregnancy, that they are about to travel the bumpy road from Nazareth to his ancestral Bethlehem – and no, he hasn’t made reservations. I don’t even want to imagine how *that* conversation went! If Mary and Joseph managed to avoid an unseemly

shouting match, it is only because Mary folded, obediently submitting to her husband's will and power over her, even as – you see – Joseph himself had bent his neck to the decree of the Emperor. And yes, there is something wrong with this picture. For in the “back story” of Jesus' birth is a concatenation of powerlessness, with one level of authority after another rolling over and playing dead – because that's the only way to stay alive. The “back story” tells us why we need a Saviour – and as we have already heard, the adult Jesus will be perceived as pushing back against power structures which leave peasants like Mary and Joseph with no recourse, no options, no power. “We found this man perverting our nation,” they will say. “Occupying” the minds and hearts of the 99%. (And unwilling to give up on the “one”.)

And here is the excruciating irony: for no sooner has Joseph paid his due to the Emperor, than Herod, his power-hungry minion, pronounces an edict against the child Jesus, and against any child who might be the child Jesus; and in Bethlehem of Judea, the sound of wailing is passed from one home to the next, as the soldiers (see how useful a census is?) snatch and slaughter one infant after another. In the very act of obedience, Joseph has unwittingly colluded with powers of darkness, handing the heads of the Innocents to Herod on a silver platter. More blood, toil, sweat, and tears.

Now, how do you suppose that these stories – all of them – were woven into Jesus' family lore? Into his sense of self? His view of right and wrong, and power, and justice, and peace? What kind of a Saviour is being announced to us this evening? Surely it is small wonder that this Jesus will grow up to challenge convention, to befriend the friendless, to eschew violence, to elevate the powerless, to favour children, to return life to the dead.

Lying in that manger, and collapsed in an exhausted huddle beside it, are the first intimations of Brown's “adult Christ at Christmas.” So, let us enjoy our picture-perfect manger scenes, and sweet carols, and harmless bambinos – because they are beautiful, and fun. But, please, please, before you leave, remember to look under the bed!