

Keynotes 1 for URCYA14 Stewart Cutler

When the world was dark
And the city was quiet,
You came.

You crept in beside us.
And no-one knew.
Only the few
Who dared to believe
That God might do something different.

I'm a big fan of context. I think we need to have a go at understanding what was happening when a passage was written to help us make sense of it. Knowing what was going on, who the writer was talking to, where they were and what had happened to them helps us to get into a story.

It's not that long since Christmas. In fact we are still in the season of Epiphany. So, I think that means that it's still ok to talk about Jesus being born, even though the Lectionary readings that we use each week in church have rocketed onto when Jesus was a grown up.

I want to speak a bit about it because the story of Jesus' birth is such an easy one to forget to think about. It's so easy to get caught up in stables and starlight. We seem to have been given another look into Christmas this year and it would be so wrong of us not to take the chance to delve a little deeper.

My favourite Gospel is Mark. So, if you have a Bible I'd like you to take it out and read the first paragraph of Mark where he tells us his version of the birth of Jesus...

What do you mean it's not there???

What does it say?

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

The Gospel is Mark and he just launches into the story. There's no long list of relatives to place Jesus in a line of succession from Abraham through King David and there is none of the poetry of John's complex and beautiful gospel opening about the Word being with God and becoming flesh. He's in so much of a hurry that we have to turn to the other gospels for the story of Mary's conception and for the birth of Jesus.

Mark is in a hurry. He wants to get on with the story and so he starts with Isaiah's prophecy and John the Baptist. That for us, well for me anyway, has often put more emphasis on the Old Testament readings for Advent. Isaiah's prophecies are wonderful. So rich and hopeful.

Isaiah 9:1-4

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.
For those who lived in a land of deep shadows—
light! sunbursts of light!
You repopulated the nation,
you expanded its joy.
Oh, they're so glad in your presence!
Festival joy!
The joy of a great celebration,
sharing rich gifts and warm greetings.
The abuse of oppressors and cruelty of tyrants—
all their whips and cudgels and curses—
Is gone, done away with, a deliverance
as surprising and sudden as Gideon's old victory over Midian.

You see the story of the birth of the Messiah doesn't begin with Mary's conception. It begins at the beginning of all things. John tells us in his Gospel that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the Word was with God. And through the Word all things were created.

Have you ever been lost? It's a horrible feeling isn't it?

I got lost once when I was a child. I know it's hard for you all to imagine but there was a time when massive supermarkets were a new thing. When I was about 5 or 6 Asda opened a gigantic new store in Blantyre, near where we lived. Well, actually it wasn't that near where we lived. It was about 30 minutes drive away in my Dad's mark 3 Ford Cortina. With no seat belts in the back.

And the store wasn't really that big. It's still there, and compared to some of the new megastores it looks like a corner shop, but that's not the point. When I was small it seemed enormous.

It was like Aladdin's cave. It didn't just sell food. It had toys, magazines and sports gear. TVs, video recorders and videos in both kinds, VHS and Betamax... this place was special.

Anyway, I went with my mum and dad and little sister who was still small enough to go in the seat in the trolley. I was supposed to be holding on but I was distracted by all the stuff.

I was looking at footballs I think... Or maybe it was sweets... Or comics... Anyway, I got distracted and by the time I looked round my parents had gone.

I was lost!

Now, you are all thinking 'for goodness sake Stewart. Get a grip. They were just in the next isle.' But you're wrong. They weren't in the next isle. They

had vanished. I was starting to panic. The shop was so huge and I was so small. I was sure that they must have just gone home without me.

I was just about to lose all hope when I saw them. I rushed up to my mum and grabbed her leg, delighted to have been saved.

Except it wasn't my mum at all. It was just someone wearing the same coat. That confused me even more! Obviously it was all some big conspiracy where everyone was pretending to be my parents to confuse me even more. I would never find them. I would be forced to make a bed on a sofa in the soft furnishings section, scavenge food from the reduced aisle and spend my days watching daytime TV, or, as some would call it, become a student.

By this time at least 5 minutes had passed. I was terrified. I had started running up and down the aisles in a desperate attempt to either find them or at the very least escape from Asda. And I did... find them. I ran into my dad. Literally. I bounced off him and landed on my backside next to the cheese.

I sobbed 'Where have you been? I was lost. You abandoned me. You left me here to die!'. They hadn't even noticed I was gone.

There are different kinds of being lost, aren't there.

There's the kind of lost that I was in Asda. The 'not really very lost, just temporarily separated from the people you are with' kind of lost. All of the time I was lost I actually knew exactly where I was. I just didn't know where my family was.

That's the kind of 'lost sheep' lost that Jesus talks about. You know the kind... where a sheep gets distracted by some grass and wanders over to nibble it. Then it sees another juicy piece of grass and goes to nibble that, and so on until it looks around and all the other sheep have gone. The sheep has nibbled its way to lostness.

That's sort of what happened to Israel.

God created the world. He created man and woman and gave them Eden, a paradise, to live in. The story goes downhill quickly from there doesn't it? Pretty soon the people are separated from God, thrown out of Eden for disobeying God. A broken relationship lies right at the heart of our story. A divorce, a separation, a split.

And so the people go off and do their own thing. God eventually has enough and decides to start over. The flood comes but God doesn't decide to kill everyone does he? No. Noah and his family are chosen to be the ones to start again.

Noah has a very human reaction to the end of the flood. When the waters go down and everything and everyone he has known is dead he grows a

vineyard, makes wine and he gets drunk. He drowns his pain. Being saved by God has a price.

Predictable things go downhill again and eventually God sends the Israelites into exile in Egypt where they will be slaves. The people are broken. Only then does God raise up a leader to lead them out of captivity and into the Promised land. Moses leads the people through the Red Sea into the desert. And despite saving the people, despite feeding them with manna and quails, the people rebel as soon as Moses goes off up the mountain to talk with God.

Have you ever noticed that the first two commandments are in the first person and all the rest are in the third person? Scholars have speculated that God tried to speak to the people directly and they couldn't handle it. Remember when God appears to Moses he does it through the burning bush and when God passes Moses by he places Moses in a crack in the rock and covers him because God's glory would be too much for Moses to bear. When Moses goes back down the mountain having seen God's back his face is shining and the people are afraid. They make him wear a veil so they can't see the effect seeing God has had on Moses.

Even in the desert when the people have been saved from slavery there is rebellion. So God makes them wait. 40 years in the desert. And then the Promised Land.

Things go along for a while until the Israelites decide they want a king. King David, former shepherd and giant slayer, makes it to the throne. His life is chequered, to say the least, but he loves God. He has a son, Solomon, who becomes king next. Solomon has it all. Riches, wisdom and power. And he uses it to build armies, to get richer. He neglects his people. He builds a massive temple but he neglects God. He doesn't pass on all the blessings he has been given to his people.

Eventually the Babylonians come and the Israelites find themselves weeping in exile again, just a few generations from Israel's golden age. Another chance lost. Another generation who just can't seem to get along with God.

It is those people, those exiles, that Isaiah speaks to with those words from the beginning of Mark's Gospel, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'",

A broken relationship.

And yet hope remains.

'Comfort, comfort my people', says your God.

Hope. There is always hope. The second exile ends and the people return home to find everything gone. The Temple is destroyed, the city of Jerusalem flattened, its walls torn down. But God is still there with them.

The people rebuild but then the Romans appear. More occupation and suppression and oppression.

That is our context. It is into that story of broken relationship, of oppression and slavery and disobedience and shame that God speaks hope.

Hope that God still loves us, even though throughout history we have repeatedly broken the covenant, the relationship, the promise.

Hope must be our context. Hope that God hasn't given up on us, and God's hope that we haven't given up on him. The same hope of the exiles.

Our problem seems to be that for all of history we don't understand. We just don't get that God loves us. We just don't understand that all we have to do is keep some pretty simple rules. We just don't realise that we are the only ones who have broken the relationship with God. We all amass our wealth or build our temples like Solomon, we all value things other than God, we all think we can manage by ourselves.

And that's how we end up in our own exile.

Exile is when you forget your story. Exile isn't just about location; exile is about the state of your soul. Exile is when you fail to convert your blessings into blessings for others. Exile is when you find yourself a stranger to the purposes of God.

So God comes to us because we are too stubborn to come to him.

For Mark that's the point. It's not that the birth of Jesus isn't important, just that for him the bigger picture seems to matter more. The history and politics and sense of exile are the background for him. They are the setting in which God arrives here, on Earth with us. Tradition has it that Mark was writing to a persecuted and suffering community, perhaps in Rome. A community in exile.

So we have to turn to Luke and Matthew to tell us the story of birth. The angels and shepherds and wise men are theirs, and yet in many ways John and Mark give us perhaps a more compelling view of God's arrival.

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And no-one knew.

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Amen