

Message for the Fourth Sunday in Advent – December 19, 2021

Luke 1:46-55

It occurred to me the other day that it is rather odd that no one has ever come up with a musical entitled “The Christmas Story: The Musical”. After all there is Andrew Lloyd Webber’s rock opera “Jesus Christ Superstar” which is a musical account of Jesus’ last week as primarily related in John’s gospel. There is also “Godspell” which is a musical account of Jesus’ life as given to us in Matthew’s gospel. So why not then “The Christmas Story: The Musical”? Is it because it sounds irreverent or perhaps even sacrilegious? It shouldn’t when we consider Luke’s gospel itself.

When we read Luke’s account of the first Christmas and what led up to it, we tend to read it as prose, but that’s not the way it was originally written. Rather, it seems as if all the principal characters were constantly bursting into song. When Zechariah for example was told that he and his wife Elizabeth, despite their advanced age, were going to have a son and that that child would be the last and greatest prophet of them all, the one whose appearance would signify the imminent appearance of the Messiah himself, Zechariah’s initial response was scepticism. But then when John the Baptist was born, Zechariah burst into song praising God and singing what we now call “The Benedictus”. It begins:

“Blessed be the God of Israel,
for he has come and redeemed his people.”

Earlier, just prior to John’s birth, the angel Gabriel visited Mary and told her that despite being a virgin, she was going to conceive and bear a son who would be the Messiah. Mary was also told that her cousin Elizabeth had conceived a child too, and so she went to see her. When she came into her cousin’s presence, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leapt for joy. Then Elizabeth exclaimed, although some scholars say she actually sang:

“Blessed are you among women
and blessed is the child you will bear!
Blessed is she who believes
what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

For her part, Mary also burst into song as well singing what we call “The Magnificat”, a part of which makes up today’s scripture passage:

“My soul glorifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.”

Moving on to the birth of Jesus itself, it was hailed by the angels singing:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth,
peace to men on whom his favour rests.”

Eight days later when the Holy Family went to the Temple, they encountered an old man named Simeon. Simeon was a very righteous man who had been told that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. When Simeon saw Jesus he promptly burst into song singing what we call “The Nunc Dimittis”, the words of which I use to conclude the last prayer on Christmas Eve:

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace
according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
which thou hast prepared in the presence of
all peoples,
A light for revelation for the Gentiles,
and for the glory of thy people Israel.”

Reading Luke’s account of that first Christmas it seems as if all of the principal characters, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, the angels, and Simeon constantly burst into song. Truly Luke presents us with “The Christmas Story: The Musical” and given the impact of music, perhaps that is only appropriate.

Some time ago I read a very interesting article about the role and impact that music has on us even if we don’t realize it. By way of example, the author wrote about the 1960’s which was a time characterized by turmoil and upheaval. There was for example the civil rights movement, woman’s liberation, the anti-Vietnam War protests, the drug culture, and the hippies. The songs of that decade both reflected what was going on and had an impact on what was happening as well. We can think of the influence of such songs as “We Shall Overcome”, “Blowing in the Wind” or “The Times They Are A-Changin’”. But just

as the music of that decade both reflected and had an impact on what was happening, so it is with all of the music that we sing and listen to and that includes our Christmas music. If we don't think so, then all we have to do is remember what happened in South Africa almost forty years ago.

Apartheid was still in full force and, as unbelievable as it may sound, the authorities actually tried to ban the playing and singing of Christmas music in some of the Black Townships. Why did they do this? Simply because they feared the impact that some of the songs might have on some of the people, songs that we perhaps sing and listen to without giving them a passing thought. Some of our religious Christmas music is relatively innocent and we can take "While Shepherd's Watched" as an example. Following the King James Version of the Bible, this hymn simply recounts the birth of Jesus as given to us in Luke's gospel. "O come all ye Faithful" on the other hand explores Jesus' nature, and at times it almost sounds like a theological textbook. Consider these words:

"God of God, Light of Light
Lo! He abhors not the virgin's womb.
Very God, begotten not created."

We can't get much more theological than that! And then there are also these words from "Hark the Herald Angels Sing":

"Hail the heaven born prince of peace,
hail the Sun of righteousness
Light and life to all he brings
risen with healing in his wings."

Some of our Christmas music though isn't just theological, some of it is almost revolutionary in its claims. We can think of the last verse of "Joy to the World" for example.

"He rules the world, with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove,
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love."

That babe lying in the manger rules the world? Everyone will be held accountable to Him? These are pretty threatening claims to any dictator or authoritarian government. Perhaps it's no wonder then that the South African authorities tried to ban the singing and playing of Christmas music. Truly the music of the season, and especially the religious music, doesn't just express our feelings of joy; it also impacts and shapes our beliefs and ultimately those of the world around us as well. For that reason, I like to think of Christmas music as being Christianity's secret weapon.

As we all well know, we live in a secular society but that changes somewhat in the weeks leading up to Christmas. TV stations that would never dream of airing religious programming quite happily air Christmas specials which, more often than not, include some religious songs such as "O Holy Night". Many radio stations that would never ever dream of playing religious music will quite happily play the music of the season including religious songs such as "The Little Drummer Boy" and "Do You Hear What I Hear?" Indeed, many people who would normally never listen to any religious music whatsoever will often quite happily listen to songs such as these. Are all of these songs accurate when it comes to the details of the Christmas story? Of course not; there was never for example a little drummer boy but nevertheless the true meaning and significance of Christmas is still proclaimed, through the back door as if it were.

Can you imagine Christmas without the music? I most certainly can't and so perhaps it is only appropriate that the best-known version of the Christmas story, Luke's version, is virtually presented as a musical. Much of the music of the Christmas season not only expresses the joy of what Christmas is all about but also proclaims the meaning of Jesus' birth. "The Christmas Story: The Musical"? Perhaps it is not as strange or far-fetched as it may first seem.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, on this last Sunday before Christmas, this day whose theme is that of love, we thank you for all the ways that love comes into our lives, and especially at this time of the year.

We thank you for such as the gatherings of families and friends, the festive meals, and the tokens of love given and received.

We thank you for all whom we love and who love us; the joy and meaning they bring into our lives.

Above all, we thank you for your love revealed to us by what it is we celebrate at Christmas; the birth of your Son, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. That birth in Bethlehem so long ago means so many different things to us but above all it means that you truly do love us. Such is your love that when you joined us you did so at the bottom as if it were; in a stable. Such is your love that you not only joined us to share life as we know it, but also to show us the way to love, joy, peace, and happiness. Such is your love that you joined us so that one day we may join you. For all of this we thank you, praying that amidst all the busyness and activity of this season, you will help us not to lose sight of what Christmas is truly all about.

On this day whose theme is love, we pray for all those who, for whatever reason, feel unloved.

We pray for relationships under strain, those who are lonely, and those who mourn for the loss of a loved one.

In this season so often characterized by excess, we pray for those who materially lack so much including enough food to eat or a place to call home.

At this time when we hope to be at peace as we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, we pray for all who have no peace as the pandemic tightens its grip once again. We pray for wisdom for those in positions of authority, and for the sake of all those working in our healthcare system. We pray for the safety and well-being of everyone, even as we hope and pray that the latest variant is not as threatening as some people say it may be.

Be with us all, bless us all, and keep us all. We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen

