

Faith, Pious Imagination and Incredulity

Today's Gospel Lesson, just read, is the continuation and conclusion of the Gospel Lesson for Holy Innocents, our text of last Sunday. That text told of the flight of the Holy Family from the wrath of King Herod. Today's text tells of their return. Having dealt at some length last week with the cause of their flight to Egypt and with the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, there seems relatively little that need be said about the return. Matthew tells the story rather matter-of-factly. Joseph is told by an angel in a dream that Herod is now dead and instructs him that they should now return to the land of Israel. Obedient as always—such is his character—Joseph does so, but being warned again in a dream of Herod's son, Archelaus, he turns aside and settles his family in Nazareth in order, St. Matthew informs us, “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, ‘He [Jesus] shall be called a Nazarene.’”

Matthew's story of the journey to Egypt and back is told simply and without incident. However, when one turns from the biblical narrative to other, extra-biblical writings, one finds a much more fanciful story. The journey of the Holy Family, as there related, is accompanied by many and fantastic miracles: They were protected from dragons; and lions and leopards knelt before them, wagging their tails in homage. Palm trees bowed down so that the blessed family might easily take of their fruit for food. Other sources say that when they reached their destination in the arid desert, the baby Jesus was responsible for the growth of balsam trees, the balm from which was known to heal everything from a snake bite to a runny nose. We are told that elsewhere pagan idols fell to the ground as the Holy Family passed by. Or again, that two thieves attempted to rob them, and that one of them repented when he saw Mary's tears. These two robbers, the story goes on, were the same two who were later crucified on either side of our Lord, and the one who had repented was the good thief who asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom.¹

¹ For all of the above, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1977), pp. 203-204.

What we learn from all of this is that when we get away from the sober texts of Holy Scripture and wander into the multitude of apocryphal or counterfeit writings and legends that grew throughout the ancient world around remarkable personalities (as they do even today), we find an abundance of fanciful myths, which, though often born of pious imaginings, contain little or no truth and lead many innocent and unthinking souls astray.

There is a plethora of such non-sense around today, not all of it so innocent. I found in Border's a book by Michael Jordon (undoubtedly not the basketball player) entitled *The Historical Mary* that purportedly reveals that (1) Mary's biography is an elaborate myth invented by the early Church to further its own interests; (2) Mary was part of a society where pagan traditions and fertility rites were widely practiced; and (3) Mary may have served as a pagan priestess participating in sacred sexual rites.

There has been a spate of books of late about the other Mary, Mary Magdalene, some claiming that she was an apostle and one of the stature of St. Peter, and that the early Church discredited her, reducing her reputation to that of a reformed prostitute. Other works claim that she was romantically involved with our Lord—echoes of the popular song from *Jesus Christ Superstar*: "I Don't Know How to Love Him"—or even that she was married to him. The author of one book entitled, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, claimed that she set out to disprove that story but ended up convinced that it was true—a traditional ploy. The book is touted as "a quest for the forgotten feminine—in hope that its return will help restore a healthy balance to planet earth," and, not surprisingly, carries a blurb of high praise from Bishop John Shelby Spong.

The pre-Christmas issue of *Time Magazine* several years ago had a cover picture of Jesus, with the caption: "THE LOST GOSPELS: Early texts that never made it into the Bible are suddenly popular. What do they tell us about Christianity today?" The feature article dealt with such early writings as the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Acts of John*, and the *Gospel of Truth*, which have received a great deal of attention in recent years, and stated that their renaissance "fills a perceived need for alternative views of the Christ story on the part of New Age seekers and of mainline believers uncomfortable with some of their faith's theological restrictions." In answering the question of why this "current

fascination with long-discounted stories and the long dead communities that told them” the article stated,

For one thing it is the latest expression of mainline Christians’ ongoing challenge of their received verities. In the 1990s this impulse fueled the “historical Jesus” debates as liberal scholars questioned the historical accuracy of the New Testament and whittled the Gospels down to the few verses that seemed factually plausible to them (yes to Jesus’ healings, no to his resurrection). Now the same restlessness is causing some believers to look beyond the established texts to heretical or noncanonical Scriptures.

The article stated that this is, as we said, an “expression of mainline Christians’ ongoing *challenge of their received verities.*” It is indeed an attempt to overthrow the historic faith of the Christian Church, that faith that was once delivered to the saints, which won its way in the world by the beauty and power of its truth, and from which all of western civilization, and indeed all the world, has reaped such untold benefits. It is an attempt to discredit *the Christian faith*—there is only one—by those who do not and will not embrace that faith.

Beyond that, it is an attempt to erect in the place of the rejected faith a substitute. The article spoke of the felt need “for *alternative views of Christianity.*” It should have said “alternative views to Christianity.” The attempt is to exchange the historic faith of the Church for another, for one that does not challenge the ethics, or lack thereof, of contemporary culture. Is it not patently clear on its very face that the pseudo-scholarly machinations of which we have spoken have as an underlying purpose the liberation—or extinction (!)—of sexual ethics? Who can miss the fact that so much of this revisionism involves radically altering the perceived sexuality of the two Marys and even of our Lord? The purported theological explorations of Bishop Spong and others have resulted in a widespread attempt to overthrow Christian ethics, or to baptize pagan ones, as we have surely seen enacted on center stage in recent years. It is not without reason that the greatest challenge to the severe monotheism and strict ethical standards of Israel of old, as expressed above all through Moses and the Ten Commandments, was the ancient cult of Baal, of the god Haddad, who was “the fertility-god par excellence of Canaan.”²

² *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), vol. I, p. 328.

It must surely be understood that not all that flies under the banner of scholarly research is impartial and unbiased. Albert Schweitzer wrote a careful survey of the nineteenth century quest of the historical Jesus and ended up showing how each of the great New Testament scholars who engaged in that quest produced in the end a Jesus that, not surprisingly, looked very much like themselves, that is, that reflected in clear and profound ways their own approach, presuppositions and interests. Even so, many who lay their hands on the historic Christian faith today end up remolding it in their own image and likeness, and thus destroying it.

The prophet Jeremiah lamented in the name of the Lord, “My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:13). That is an apt illustration of the situation we have been describing. People have rejected the true faith and Him who is called the Fount of Life and the Living Water, and have made for themselves broken pots which are leaky vessels. It is noteworthy that so many of these endeavors are described as ‘quests,’ —remember the book that was described as “a *quest* for the forgotten feminine”? The predominant character of so much of this activity is a search, a quest, a looking for something one does not have. The predominant character of the Christian faith, by contrast, is the assurance that we have *found* him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. It is the Christian *faith*, not the Christian *quest*. That doesn’t mean it is not a journey or that we have arrived—St. Anselm and others rightly spoke of *fides quaerens intellectum*, ‘faith seeking understanding’—but it does mean that we have started on a sure and certain path. We are not inventing things, or reinventing them, as we go along.

The *Time Magazine* article to which we have referred used one analogy which I thought was particularly apropos. It spoke of the traditional understanding of the Christian Church and its faith as resembling a hardwood tree:

bushy with denominational profusion on top, but a plumb line straight in its bottom half, theologically unified down through the hardy ‘primitive church’ and on, through apostolic roots, to Christ. To be sure, there was some record of early deviations, or heresies. But they seemed minor, perverse curiosities of limited interest.

The contemporary view of liberal scholars of early Christianity, it stated, is “not as an oak but as a mangrove, a welter of trunks with names like Gnosticism, Ebionism and Marcionism, each offering a different version of Christianity.” This is the unprincipled inclusivism with which the Church is so seriously and sadly infected today. It is “I’m OK: You’re OK” carried to the extreme, only it’s “My god is OK; your god is OK,” with the sole exception, that is, of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and of our Lord Jesus Christ. The first commandment of Moses is turned on its head: “I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have any other god but me.”

Jesus at Caesarea Philippi turned to his disciples and asked, “Who do men say that I am?” Various answers were proffered. Next came the real question, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter, blessed Peter, spoke for them all and said, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Who do people in our day say that he is? The answers abound today as then, most claiming he is anything but Christ, the Son of the living God, but there is only one true answer, one confession of faith that is our only hope and salvation. It is the faith of the Apostles, the faith of the ancient councils and creeds, the faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church throughout the ages.

St. Paul wrote most solemnly to young Timothy, his son in the faith and colleague in the ministry,

I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. *For the time will come when they will no longer endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned to fables.*

- II Tim. 4:1-4

The world runs after fables, broken cisterns that can hold no water—witness the phenomenal success of *The Da Vinci Code*. What it desperately needs is the One who is the way, the truth, and the life, and to him it is up to us to bear faithful witness in word and deed.