

Many of you will remember that several years ago I wrote a play about the Easter story which was presented at the Easter sunrise service. It should come as no surprise that I then thought about doing a similar play about Christmas. After a careful reading of the nativity stories in Luke and Matthew I hit a major roadblock. The two stories are very different and cannot be combined.

The popular image of Christmas – both in the church and outside – is the story of the Annunciation, the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the birth in a stable, the arrival of shepherds invited by singing angels and the visit to the temple where Jesus is recognized by Anna and Simeon. It is a great story. It has captured the imagination of painters and poets so that most of our visual sense of the nativity and the hymns and carols we sing come from this story. But this is Luke's story.

Matthew's story, which we have been hearing these last several weeks has little in common. Yes, Mary is the mother, Joseph is her husband and Jesus is born to her in Bethlehem. There ends the similarity. No journey to Bethlehem or hunt for accommodation – they live there. No singing angels. No Shepherds.

In Matthew's story the focus shifts from Mary to Joseph. As Elisabeth has recounted, it is Joseph who receives an angelic message concerning the unborn child. The birth is unremarkable. Sometime later came the amazing visit from the wise men of whom we heard last week.

The wise men unwittingly trigger a chain of events which turns the story dark. It tells us much about the world in which Jesus grew up. It should also make us more aware of how many children in this world are growing up as Jesus grew up.

After the visit of the wise men Joseph has another angelic revelation. Jesus is in peril. Joseph wastes no time. As Matthew puts it, “Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt”. They ran for their lives. The valuable gifts of the wise men must have helped on the journey.

Running to Egypt meant that Jesus early life was spent as a refugee. Perhaps not in a refugee camp but certainly in a foreign world. He would have lived amidst a language and customs which were very different from what he spoke and did at home. But he was safe. Joseph’s quick action meant that Jesus escaped the wrath of Herod which fell upon the children of Bethlehem.

Joseph and Mary must have longed to return to their home country. Herod died some years after the flight to Egypt and again Joseph had a dream which advised him to move to Israel. However, Herod’s son Archelaus, who was almost as bad as his father, was ruling in nearby Judea. Joseph was uneasy and again a dream gave him a solution. The family moved to Nazareth in Galilee. In Nova Scotia terms, this would be like somebody who didn’t want to be seen in Halifax moving to Delap’s Cove.

Life for Jesus would have been easier in Nazareth than it had been in Egypt. Now, instead of being a refugee, he was merely a ‘come from away’. If the child was like the man of the gospels, he would have been a pretty bright fellow. He probably had inherited some Bethlehem ‘big town’ manners from his parents. It would have been hard for Jesus to fit in. It is unlikely that Jesus became ‘one of the boys’.

Matthew doesn’t tell us anything about Jesus himself during his early years. However, the story of the forced moves and of the places where Jesus lived gives us some idea of the nature of his childhood years. They would not have been easy and Jesus knew well as he grew up what it was to be a marginal man – to be a person always just a bit on the outside.

When we look at Jesus childhood life experience it should come as no surprise that in his adult ministry he reached out to the marginal members of society. He could relate to people on the margins because he had been there. Even if he hadn’t had their specific experiences, he knew how they felt.

But why is Matthew’s story so different from Luke’s story?

Do the differences matter?

Why should we care?

The stories were written long after the events they describe and they were written for different communities, each facing its own challenges. Matthew was writing for people from a Jewish background. These were a people whose society had been blown apart and scattered across the empire when the Romans trashed Jerusalem. The story Matthew told about Jesus was their story. Many of them were refugees and many were living on the margins of society. Luke was writing for non-Jewish Christians. They were mostly urban dwellers, no longer welcome in the synagogues in which they had come by their faith. They needed the joy and sense of worth which fills Luke's story.

I said earlier that the stories were different and could not be combined. That is not quite true. They can be stitched together but doing so requires dropping some of the fanciful elements. But this does not really matter. They are not history. They are both statements about Jesus and why Jesus matters.

It would be easy to say that these are two stories about something which happened 2000 years ago and so are not important. Not so! These are very much stories about today. Are there refugees in this world? Are there people who flee far from their homes to avoid persecution? Are there people who feel no sense of worth – who think that society has no use for them? These stories work together to tell us what following Jesus requires. Matthew's dark tale speaks to the importance of openness to the guidance of God and brings focus on the marginal members of society. Luke's tale also speaks of openness to possibilities and brings focus on hope and joy. Together they provide a thought provoking prologue to the life of Jesus which we will encounter in the weeks ahead.