

An Advent Symphony

Four movements for full Orchestra

AN ADVENT COURSE at HOME

by Peter Reiss

Third Movement – The Way Prepared

3.1 The World of Jesus

It is a very peculiar thing. God, Creator and beyond time and space, is found in a womb, constrained by birth, in a particular place and a particular time.

What about all the other places and people and times? Why then, and why there?

Short answer as to why there – because this is the area of land, in all its vulnerabilities where God had already revealed himself to his people, even if they were not really understanding it.

Why then? We do not know.

The Roman Empire was one of the greatest Empires of all time, but it did not cover the world by any means, only the Mediterranean and some more, though within that area it did bring a sort of stability and a movement of people.

It was religiously diverse, ethnically mixed, but Greek was a language that many could understand.

It is one of the mysteries and deeper questions of our faith: Why?

For the other religions it was an arrogant claim that God had revealed himself exclusively in this one person. For almost all it was absurd that God had revealed himself in the form of a “servant”, had suffered and died. Even today, Islam, which has a high regard for Jesus as a prophet, does not accept that he was crucified. How could God suffer in such a way? Indeed, how or why would God be born in dangerous times, at such risk – and Matthew’s gospel highlights this with Herod’s attempt to kill the baby at birth.

We have probably got too used to our creeds. Some call it the scandal of particularity; how can we claim Jesus is the one? A prophet maybe, a good teacher, certainly, a leader of the people, ok, one among many avatars of God, if you like, but the one and only ‘Son of God’, the one and only time God became human – that takes a lot of accepting.

Some don’t want God to become human at all – and some would argue that there are many who show us something of God by their virtuous lives.

Christians accept the second – we celebrate the saints after all, but in Jesus all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell as Colossians puts it.

As we get nearer to Christmas what does it mean to worship Jesus, born of Mary, as the Word made flesh, begotten not made as the Creed says.

Fully God and fully human pushes our understanding beyond what it can cope with, and to understand the fully human, we need to learn more about the world into which Jesus was born.

We will find it has some general similarities with the modern world, and also was very different from our Western world in particular.

This week we will look a bit more at this world and how the Gospel writers – in their four rather different ways – seek to explain and proclaim Jesus.

The Letter to the Hebrews begins like this:

*Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways, through the prophets, but **in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.** (Heb 1:1)*

In the ancient world, life was understood to come primarily from the man, from his ‘seed’ which was planted in a fertile woman. The woman’s egg was not known about. Life came from a man and a son was a full representation of the father, while a daughter was not, as she was different.

In this world view, God is male, the one who generates life, and Jesus is male, the perfect representation of the Father. We no longer hold to such an understanding of how life starts, and we can see how such a view was patriarchal and led to women being seen as second-class. Rightly we should challenge all such understandings, but it may help us to see how the ancient world thought about things. We may also want to acknowledge the unique and vital role that Mary plays in this drama. [But explorations of gender and human identity are for a different project!]

Hebrews in its language also identifies Jesus, uniquely, as the God-man, and the Christian Faith is exclusive and particular in claiming that this person, this particular individual is not simply a good person, or even a remarkable person, but much more, he is God in human form, and, as it happens, living in that place, that culture, that time, that family. One among the billions who have lived. About whom the word “unique” is truly and properly to be used. Scandalous!

3.2 Who's Who

So who else should we know about in this world that God chose to live in?

The Gospels talk of Pharisees and Sadducees; there are a couple of Kings, both called Herod (which is confusing); there are Roman officials who deal with Jesus and later with Paul.

As we saw the Jewish faith had emerged and adapted and developed over centuries. Because of their history, the local synagogue, with a teacher was – as it were - the local “church”, and there was the “cathedral” in Jerusalem, the Temple which Herod was rebuilding as a massive Grade 1 building, which dominated the city, a mark of Herod’s greatness as a philanthropist. At the time of Jesus, it was nearly finished, but it would soon be destroyed by the Romans (Ad 70).

Jesus grew up and probably spent most of his adult life in Galilee, where the villages were mostly Jewish in population but the towns more mixed. Joseph was a carpenter – possibly involved in building houses. Jesus was linked to the Lake, where fishermen plied their trade.

Jesus’ cousin was John the Baptist; he dressed, deliberately, like Elijah but he would not have been too unusual – we know there were wandering “prophets”, as well as communities of religious people, like the *Qumran Community* whose papers have been found, who set themselves apart, waiting for God’s Kingdom.

The *Pharisees* were a mixed group and we see this in the way that Jesus can be positive about some and scathing about others. There were local teachers, though the leadership in Jerusalem was more strict and they were generally not too keen on the Roman Occupation.

The *priests, High Priest, and Sadducees* however were a more elite group who had accommodated to the Romans; they were the religious leaders in Jerusalem and demanded the tithes and taxes due to them from the people.

When Jesus came to the Temple he overthrew the tables of the money-lenders – the Temple had its own currency and people got a poor rate of exchange before they could buy a sacrificial animal.

Jesus, in his teaching is called a “*Rabbi*”, a teacher, though there are questions about how he has learnt what he knows, and there are comments about how he teaches with authority.

Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee basically did what the Romans demanded, but Judea, around Jerusalem, had become a Roman Province after Herod the Great died. It had a Roman Governor and Pontius Pilate seems to have been unpopular and with good reason.

Roman soldiers were garrisoned in various towns, and could demand that the local people helped carry their baggage for a mile – walk the extra mile said Jesus to show them up.

There were numerous *resistance movements*, and Roman repression was ruthless. Crucifixion was the public, barbaric form of execution, deliberately public and barbaric, to be a warning to others.

When Jesus was crucified there was Barabbas and two others who were what Mark calls ‘*bandits*’ / ‘*insurgents*’ what we might call terrorists.

Some made a living working for the Romans, like the *tax-collectors* who were despised for this.

Some of the best land was owned by *absentee landlords*; most people lived at subsistence level and poor harvests could lead to destitution.

Disability, blindness, etc often meant *begging*.

Leprosy and skin diseases made you unclean and so cast-out. Trauma, violence, despair, all contributed to mental health issues, and there was a general belief in demons and the demonic

The religious leaders expected the people to keep the purity code, but that was so difficult if you were poor.

When the gospels talk about a group called “*sinners*” they mean the poor who could not purify themselves, those whose jobs meant they were *always* unclean, and so beyond saving.

Night-watch shepherds (probably unclean) are told of Jesus birth; Jesus is accused of associating with and eating with the “*sinners*”; He heals a centurion’s slave, and affronts the powers that be by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, clearing claiming to be King and Messiah.

But his understanding of Messiah is not a conquering King who will drive out the Romans, and this may explain why some of the crowd turn against him.

This is a real, turbulent and different world in which Jesus reveals the love and truth of God.

3.3 Mark

Mark almost certainly is the earliest of the gospels.

What did he think he was writing and why?

Probably he is writing in the late 60s AD and to the church communities maybe in Rome, as he has to explain some Jewish customs.

In the ancient world there were novels and short stories, and there were short biographies of famous people, often concentrating on key elements of their life.

But in the Bible we have noted there were long accounts of the lives (including in some cases the birth) of significant people – Moses, Samuel, David etc.

Mark seems to be blending the form of ancient biography with the style and format of the Old Testament accounts, and using some of the known story-telling skills.

He says he is going to tell the *euangelion* of Jesus Christ, that is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In fact, his first word is “beginning”, just like in Genesis!

And then, *boom*, we hear about the teaching of John the Baptist in the wilderness, linked to the verses from Isaiah. And Jesus comes to be baptised, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and a voice from heaven declares Jesus to be God’s Son (just as Mark has said in verse 1!)

And *boom*, Jesus is tempted for 40 days and then we are into Jesus teaching about the Kingdom.

Mark does not include any details about the birth of Jesus – something Matthew and Luke will include in their different emphases.

If you read Mark’s gospel it moves at a pace though there are some stories where the pace slows and the detail increases – the Syro-Phoenician woman, the man oppressed by many demons.

Half way through the focus changes. Jesus now speaks of his pending death, and the disciples struggle to understand. The final quarter contains lengthy teaching on what will happen, and then a long account of the trial and crucifixion.

There are no resurrection accounts, save a young man telling the women that Jesus is raised and gone ahead of them, and the women say nothing ‘for they were afraid’.

This ending was considered so incomplete that later writers wrote further verses which you can find in brackets at the end of the gospel.

Mark sketches the life and activities and teaching of Jesus; very definitely a human being, yet from the start we know also the Son of God, the beloved of God. The centurion declares this truth as he sees Jesus on the Cross, but the disciples have struggled to understand it.

The women are fearful and silent, and the early Christians have to pick up the story – will we share the news of the resurrection or will we be silent.

What have we made of Jesus’ teaching, invitation and challenge?

For us this Advent we can enjoy a baby, and we can wrap up as it were, the story with the manger, and the animals, and Mary in her blue clothing. There is no sentimentality in Mark’s Gospel (or in any other)

The Advent Sunday reading for Year B is Mark chapter 13 where Jesus speaks of the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the horror and terror for its inhabitants.

Mark was written at a time of wars and uncertainty, when Christians were at risk from Jews and from the authorities; when the resurrection of Jesus was new and when the other religions and religious and cultural movements were trying to drown out this new and out-of-tune voice.

For if the Bible is a symphony and the four gospels are a theme played in four ways, then the Bible is also a piece of music which is both an invitation and a challenge to the surrounding world.

It is a different tune, a piece of music which does not fit with the surrounding tunes and melodies.

Jesus arrives on the scene in Mark without much warning and engages in what is often a confrontational mission, yet one of invitation and healing and hope.

In what way, for us, is Advent and Christmas a gospel message, a *euangelion* – an announcement of good news and in what way will we share that good news, or hide it or so dress it that it loses its brightness?

[A *euangelion* was normally a message brought by a herald, to announce a victory or good news, like the birthday of the Emperor.]

3.4 Matthew

It is not clear whether Matthew knew Luke's Gospel or vice versa, though it is generally agreed both Matthew and Luke knew Mark, and both decided to add an account of Jesus birth.

Matthew's birth account is very Jewish in focus – Joseph, more than Mary is the key parent and he, like the Magi receives dreams which guide his actions.

The ruler who is threatened by Jesus is Herod: Herod is the non-Jewish King, ruthless, rich and successful, surrounded by his court. For Jews he was not a descendant of David, and his family were not the rightful rulers but he was powerful and ruthless.

Matthew tells us that the true Son of David is born, born in Bethlehem, the true city of David, but Matthew tells us more than this because his first verses include a long genealogy linking Jesus not just to David but to Abraham.

This baby who will be called Jesus and Emmanuel, is a true descendant of Abraham and of David.

For Jewish readers – and Matthew is probably written to Christians from a Jewish background – Jesus is presented as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies and Matthew quotes several times from the OT to enforce this in the first two chapters. [But the first worshippers are foreign!!]

Matthew draws on the birth story of Moses, who needed protection from the wicked Pharaoh. Jesus the baby needs protection from Herod. Ironically Jesus finds safety in Egypt, because the "Pharaoh" is in Jerusalem!

And Matthew presents Jesus like a second Moses. There are five sections of teaching in the gospel, just as there are five books of Moses in the Old Testament (Genesis – Deuteronomy were considered the books of Moses). And the Sermon on the Mount reminds us of Moses bringing the Law from the mountain to the Israelites, and the feeding of the 5000 reminds us of God feeding the Israelites in the wilderness.

And Jesus confronts the religious leaders; In Matthew's gospel in particular, Jesus is challenging the religious leaders of the day; they have become dead inside, like whitened sepulchres; they are hypocritical and they make things harder for others, without lifting a finger to help.

While Mark was written to a group of Christians living with uncertainties politically, Matthew seems to be written to a group of Christians who are breaking free from, while remaining Jewish. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law, he is "properly" Jewish, the heir of Abraham and David. He came first to the Jewish people but his message is for all. These new Christians were almost certainly facing antagonism and maybe worse from the wider Jewish community who accused them of heresy and false teaching. Matthew wants to show that Jesus truly is the one promised in the Scriptures, the fulfilment of the Jewish promises, and the one who will open that message to all nations – "Go and make disciples of all nations"

And the charge of hypocrisy, of saying one thing but failing to do it, is also a challenge to the Christians who must be doers of the Word and not hearers only. They must hear, receive and respond as is most obviously seen in the final teaching where the peoples are separated like sheep from goats, according to whether they have responded to human need, because, we discover, Jesus was present in that need.

This is not a new piece of teaching but was already a strand within Judaism, but Matthew makes clear it remains foundational for the new followers of Jesus.

The one who came and brought healing to the blind, or the deaf, strength to the lame so they could live again, calls his followers to show the same love and care.

For us, who are not immediately from a Jewish background, the gospel of Matthew reminds us that our faith is rooted in the Jewish faith, that we follow a Jewish teacher and we are those who are now welcome in the people of God because of the witness of the chosen people and the saving death of Jesus.

Some say Matthew is anti-Semitic and certainly anti-Semites have used the gospel as ammunition, but Matthew is not anti-Semitic, but he speaks against those who reject Jesus, the leadership and the authorities who could not see in Jesus the Messiah they claimed to hope for.

This Christmas we must remember that we worship a Saviour born in Bethlehem; the gospel comes from the Jews as it were.

3.5 Luke

When we hear the Christmas story, we normally hear a mix of Matthew and Luke; shepherds and Wise Men tumble over each other in a stable, camels and sheep in the background and possibly a donkey that Mary was riding on.

Spoiler Alert – none of the accounts in the Bible mention any animals at all!

Matthew wanted to expand Mark for his congregations who were mostly Jewish converts and needing more.

Luke wants to explain Mark more fully to his congregations who are mostly “Gentile” in origin, that is converts from other faiths and cultures, who know something of the Jewish ways but who live in the cities of the Empire.

So Luke includes an account of the birth of Jesus, and many think Mary may have shared her story with him, because Luke’s birth account is about Mary not Joseph, and it includes the birth of John the Baptist.

Far, far away, in a corner of the Roman Empire, two ordinary women are discussing their remarkable pregnancies. These two ordinary women will have sons who will change the world – John the Baptist and Jesus. Luke’s account of this world-changing moment starts in the ordinary, and then he tells us about the Roman Emperor requiring that all the world should be registered / taxed. Augustus was famous for claiming he had brought peace. He was the one who thought he could manage all the world. Little did he know that these two women would offer a very different understanding of ruling; that the true Prince of Peace was being born in an area just outside his full control.

Luke gently points out to his readers that the true Lord was born in very different circumstances from the emperors.

And the first to see and witness to this baby were shepherds, the ones who were out at night to guard their flocks – so not the wealthy elite, and not the religious elite, but some other very ordinary people. This is not how kings should be born!

Luke goes on to tell us that Jesus was circumcised, and after the 40 days, Mary comes from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to present her first-born. This is all very normal and ordinary, and two older people see this baby and are prompted by the Holy Spirit to speak. Simeon recognises this baby as “God’s Salvation, a light to lighten the Gentiles” – what a message for the gentile readers of the gospel!

And Anna, an elderly prayerful woman also speaks of Jesus, to those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Actually, the story began in the Temple, where John’s father was a priest and was informed that he would have a son to be called John. Now at the end of the account of their births, we are back in the Temple and Simeon and Anna are confirming that this baby is one greater even than John.

Luke is always keen to show that the gospel comes out of Jerusalem, it comes from the Jewish centre and overflows to the gentiles, to the non-Jews, to people like you and me, as his story continues in Acts (his second volume as it were!).

Luke is telling you and me, and all the gentiles before us, that God has brought salvation – has shone light for the gentiles – in the person and work of Jesus.

The crucifixion that secured our salvation was just outside the city. The disciples were in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit came on them at Pentecost, and they went out to speak to people from all parts of the world who had come to the city for the Festival. These people were already interested in the Jewish faith, but then the message is taken by Philip, and Peter and Paul and others to Antioch and then to Ephesus, and Colossae, and Philippi, and Thessalonica, and Corinth and Rome – places we know about because Paul wrote to the new churches there.

Our faith is only real because it is linked back to the birth of this Jewish boy to his Jewish parents. And Luke, more than the other gospel-writers, wants to help the non-Jewish peoples discover salvation. Of course he does, not least as he travelled with Paul, who gave his life to sharing the gospel around the Mediterranean, to Jew and Gentile alike.

This Christmas we – like the Gentile Magi – can come and worship, can find salvation and hope, but only in as much as we go to the little town of Bethlehem, and join the shepherds, and don’t get distracted by the big Temple Herod was building, or the grand plans of Augustus.

And we are then called to share this story with others around us.

And Mary, Luke says, at the end of the birth narrative, pondered all these things in her heart. May we also ponder deeply on this amazing thing!

3.6 John

John writes a very different type of account from the other three gospel-writers.

Some suggest that he is like a Jazz-musician 'riffing' on the themes from the gospels, picking up a few key themes and developing them. It is rather nice to think that there is a jazz section in our symphony!

Others suggest John writes almost like a lawyer, making a case for Jesus as the Messiah: '*These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah (Christ) and through believing have life in his name.*' (Jn 20:31)

Did the first readers of this gospel already know the other gospels – It is peculiar that John does not include any parables; and John calls Jesus' miracles "signs" and he selects only a few, most of which are not in the other gospels.

The birth of Jesus is captured in the memorable phrase – 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us' and John goes on 'we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth' – John here saying that the person of Jesus – the human being – is so full of grace and truth that he shines out with the glory of God. What a claim to make!

John is not interested in Jesus the baby being born, he wants us to reflect on the theology. The one who was there initiating Creation, whose word called the stars and the earth into being, became human, lived among us.

For us, living in our modern, or is it post-modern Western world, a world which is now multi-cultural and where there are many faiths as well as many who claim no religious allegiance, there is a challenge; how do we speak of God? Is it enough to tell the stories of Jesus (even if they are infused with Old Testament images and references) or do we have to try and find words and phrases which will connect today.

John calls Jesus the "*Logos*", the Word, and this is a clever amalgamation of the Greek idea of meaning and reason and the Jewish reference to the power of God's speaking which formed Creation.

Many would be intrigued by the *Logos* – but then shocked by the claim that this *Logos* was to be found in the person of Jesus and no one else.

There is a potential arrogance to this claim. Of course there is – even in the Gospels Jesus is

challenged for the claims he makes. Although John writes a gospel which should intrigue and connect with people of other faith traditions, he is clear that Jesus, and Jesus alone is the truth, the life, the Logos, the way.

For some this sits uncomfortably – it seems to disparage other religions and beliefs. It is probably better to see that it is not disparaging them, but it is claiming a difference.

Christmas is a Christian festival, even if it is also a mid-winter festival as well for us. And the clue is in the name – Christmas, Christian. Christ – the anointed one of God, the awaited one for the Jews, though many did not see Jesus as the One.

Other faiths celebrate Jesus as a prophet or a teacher, or as one among many spiritual leaders and examples. The Christmas message is that in this one person, and one place, the Word became flesh.

And John writes so that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and in believing have life in his name.

In John's Gospel, Jesus changes the water of purification into the finest wine at a wedding banquet – a complex image which points to God's Kingdom. He calls Lazarus out of the tomb, and claims to be the Resurrection and the Life.

The way John tells it, Jesus remains very much in control, despite being arrested and condemned. Somehow this is all in God's plan and purpose, little though Pilate and the High Priests know it.

We go back to Abraham, called by God to be a blessing to others, not just to receive blessing, to the chosen people who were to be the example that would draw others to God, not by force, but by living. Jesus is the fulfilment of this tradition – the example of God's love that should draw others to God.

We who have discovered this truth are called to share it, to tell it to others, but as Jesus did, through care, through love, through holy living, through words of invitation and – when needed – challenging the injustices and wrongs of this world.

Four complementary gospels in harmony with each other but different in emphasis, contributing to the symphony - giving a richer understanding as we hear them all. Pointing to Jesus the Christ.