

Art and the Bible Story – The Birth of Jesus

Luke 2: 1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Around the table

1. What do I find interesting, new or challenging about the image and/or the passages that we've read?
2. How do I relate to the picture in terms of understanding the Christian faith?
3. What does a focus on this picture say to us about following Christ today?



Sandro Botticelli, *'Mystic Nativity'*, 1500

© The National Gallery, London.

Reflection by Revd Richard Carter

Associate Vicar for Mission, St Martin-in-the-Field

I've always thought that Botticelli's Mystic Nativity has such an amazing energy. It is certainly unconventional. It's like the vision of a three-tier universe. At the top are the angels of God, with the sky opening up to reveal the kingdom of heaven. In the centre is the stable and the holy family with an ox and ass looking on inquisitively.

At the bottom of the painting, as men and angels embrace, little devils scatter and flee into holes in the ground. The painting is not simply a representation of the Gospel accounts of the nativity. Rather it's a glimpse of the kingdom of God, the story of a birth that seems to unite both heaven and earth.

At the centre of this painting is a huge Christ child. He is at the centre of the dance –raising his head and right hand in blessing and his leg kicking out to touch the cloak of a truly massive Mary: if she stood up she would take the thatch off the roof! It's as though Jesus is the centre of the dance. The vulnerable naked child gives life and joy to the whole universe. From his hand the dance spirals up through the vertical of the body of Mary into the circle of the dancing angels on the roof and then through the toes of the angels up into their wider circle lifting up in to the dome of heaven.

To the left with their long gowns are the Magi; and on the right, in their short hooded garments, the shepherds – drawn into the action by the angels. All are crowned with olive, the emblem of peace and the angels who dance carry olive branches. The scrolls of the angels pointing to the crib read "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" and the scrolls wound around the branches in the foreground combine with some of those held by the angels in the foreground to read: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth good will towards men".

Botticelli seems to be uniting the Gospel: because from the nativity stories we've heard and the nativity plays we were perhaps involved in as children, we often see the nativity as one unified story. In fact each of the Gospel accounts are very different.

Mark the first Gospel writer does not include the birth of Jesus at all in his account. But he begins with the announcement so clearly reflected in this painting: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ Son of God." Gospel is good news. Mark's Gospel will begin with the message of John the Baptist and the Baptism of Jesus.

Luke is the Gospel writer who tells us, as we have just heard, about the census, Mary and Joseph going to be registered in Bethlehem, Jesus being wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn. It is Luke who tells us about the shepherds. Why this slant on the story. Well in many ways it is Mary's story that he tells. He will have a particular interest in the way the Gospel is revealed to the outsider, the sinner, the dispossessed. He is writing for the Gentiles.

Matthew will tell the story from the point of view of Joseph. And he will be the only gospel writer to narrate the story of the magi from the east: their reading of the signs and the failure of those in Jerusalem to recognise the Messiah for whom they have been waiting. Indeed the Messiah for Herod is a threat and we are deliberately reminded by Matthew of the parallel with Moses and the persecution of the children of Israel. Matthew is particularly concerned to point out how the Old Testament is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus.

But also present in the Botticelli's picture, is the vision of the fourth Gospel writer: a wider vision, and a higher Christology. That Jesus is not simply God's child. He is "the Word made flesh" who lives among us. This is the one who is the "I am," the source of all life – the very source of the dance: everything that is, comes from him, all things belong to him. Here we see the meaning of our Christian faith: not God in a distant land but a God made flesh, incarnating in the human flesh all that God is.

And we are called to take part in this divine reciprocity, this gift, this unity. We too are called to become part of the action of God in the world, part of the circle, to take part in this dance from earth to heaven from heaven to earth. Only God could be so human only humanity could be so divine.

In addition, the painting seems to be hinting at Jesus' second coming and the Book of Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.'"

The puzzling Greek inscription at the top of the picture, begins thus: "I Sandro made this picture at the conclusion of the year 1500 in the troubles of Italy." The year 1500 was a troubled time. At the dawn of this new century, as at the dawn of our own new millennium, they feared the worse – even the end of the world. In this vision, Botticelli celebrates God with us and looks forward to the second coming in the hour of greatest need.

A prayer

Blessed God, our heavenly Father, in the coming of your Son you brought heaven to earth and lifted earth to heaven.

Help us to learn from the devotion of Mary and Joseph so that we too may become bearers of your love.

Like the shepherds and the magi, grant that we might discover you as the one who announces peace on earth and good will towards all.

And help us to become part of the dance of all creation, the divine life.

Amen

Art and the Bible Story – Parables/Mary and Martha

Luke 10:25-42

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

Around the table

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Diego Velázquez, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, probably 1618

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Reflection by Dr Chloë Reddaway

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Diego Velázquez painted this scene around 1618, when he was working in Seville. It's influenced by Flemish paintings which included biblical scenes within contemporary, domestic ones. And here, in the background of a 17th century kitchen we can see 'Christ in the House of Mary and Martha.'

Poor Martha! She is cooking for everyone, busy in the kitchen, missing out on the conversation, worrying about the meal... Actually Luke doesn't say this, only that Martha is 'distracted by her many tasks.' But having welcomed Jesus into her home it seems reasonable to assume that her tasks are, at least in part, related to offering him hospitality. Meanwhile Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him, not helping Martha. When Martha complains, Jesus rebukes her. Mary is in the right, while Martha is bringing her distress upon herself by not prioritising properly. It's Mary who has 'chosen the better part.'

Jesus' rebuke seems harsh. After all, isn't Martha working for him? Isn't she behaving commendably? At the start of this chapter, Jesus sends out his followers to proclaim the Kingdom of God and cure the sick. He tells them to rely on the hospitality of strangers, eating what they are given and staying with whoever invites them. Hospitality is described here as something given and received between people who share in Christ's 'peace.'

Next comes the Parable of the Good Samaritan, in which we learn that the true neighbour is the one who shows mercy to a stranger in trouble. The despised Samaritan is the hero because he cares for the wounded man, carries him to safety, and pays for his bed and board at an inn. Hospitality and hospital come from the same root. Offering hospitality, responding to need, sharing with others: these things are part of proclaiming the Kingdom and inheriting eternal life. Jesus encourages his followers to give freely, but also to receive. The exchange is good for both parties.

So why is Martha rebuked? Not for her hospitality, but for her lack of discernment. She hasn't realised that there is something even more important than hospitality when Jesus visits her house. Now that he is here, the priority is to be with him. Not out in the kitchen. Martha is 'distracted' by serving him, instead of listening to him. She is concerned with herself: Mary is not helping her.

There is always a tension between pull towards the active and the contemplative lives. We may incline towards activity or meditation, but both are important and there will always be times when we need to do the opposite. Martha has failed to see this. So the story of Mary and Martha is like a parable: it is a story of the everyday, it carries a lesson which we have to unpick, and we may not immediately like what it tells us.

Velázquez's painting expresses this parabolic quality through its two related scenes. In the foreground we see a young cook, using a pestle and mortar. To her left is a stunning still life of fish, eggs, garlic, and chilli. Beside her, an old woman is directing her attention towards a

scene in the top right corner. Here we see Christ in the house of Mary and Martha, his hand raised as he rebukes Martha. Behind him another doorway opens out into somewhere beyond our sight.

But what, and where, is this scene? Are we looking through a serving hatch into the next room? Or, through an internal window? Is this a painting on the wall, set in a deep frame? Could it be a mirror, reflecting a scene which is actually in front of the figures? It's not clear.

The old lady's pointing finger mirrors Martha's pointing finger. It's a prophetic gesture and her age is appropriate for such a role. But if we are tempted to see the foreground figures as contemporary parallels of Martha and Mary, their ages have been confusingly reversed. It is the younger woman who is cooking, and the elder who points to Christ.

The still life in the foreground is painted with exceptional clarity. The fish look wet, the eggs hard and smooth, the mortar heavy. There's a solidity and realism here which grabs the attention. Food is something immediate, compelling, necessary. It has its own imperatives. Fish and eggs don't keep: they must be cooked and eaten.

The tasks of the kitchen are not easy to set aside.

The young cook and her older companion are painted with looser brushwork. Their identities are slightly less defined. It's a little harder to know what – whom – we are looking at. And the scene of Mary and Martha with Christ is even more loosely painted. There's a suggestion of distance, both spatial and temporal. There are strong visual echoes between the two scenes, but no direct reflection. The women in the foreground are not simply a mirror image of Mary and Martha. What do they make of Martha's frustration, Mary's choice, and Christ's rebuke?

Does the young cook have a choice to make between action and contemplation?

How much freedom to choose does a poor, working woman have? What of all the women (and men) whose grinding work keeps life turning. What is it like to be told that this labour is the lesser part? The story of Martha and Mary is not an easy one and perhaps it is best understood as a parable, as something which draws on everyday situations and extracts important lessons from them.

Mary's choice was a good one in the circumstances but perhaps it was easier for her to make the right choice. Martha invited Christ and, as a guest in her house, he was primarily her 'responsibility'. Nevertheless, she allowed herself to be 'distracted' by her tasks. She couldn't see the important thing. These tasks stand out clearly in the painting – the fish, the eggs, the immediate need to feed people – while the really important thing – being with the teacher and listening to him – fades into the blurred background.

A prayer

Hospitable God, who came to be with us in your Son Jesus Christ, help us to see our need, above all else, to be with you and to listen you, like Mary, that our lives might be ordered to reflect you at the centre. We pray in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Art and the Bible Story – The last supper

John 13: 1-17

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.'

Around the table

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Jacopo Tintoretto, *Christ washing the Feet of the Disciples*, about 1575-80

© The National Gallery, London

Reflection by Revd Dr Alastair McKay

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Before our reflection, let's start by hearing the story from John's gospel.

[Reading of John 13:1-17.]

This painting depicts part of this story from John's gospel. It's clearly an important story because in John's account of the last supper, this is the central action, and there is no account of the breaking of bread and the institution of the Eucharist.

Instead, John gives us this story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Tintoretto captures the dramatic moment when Peter initially refuses to have his feet washed. The story is a particular favourite of Tintoretto, who painted six different versions of it. One of the distinctive features of this one, is that it's more intimate, set in a more obviously domestic setting, including the nice touch of the dog curled up in front of the fire. This seems in keeping with an act which is distinctly intimate, that of washing someone's feet.

How do you feel about washing someone else's feet? I wonder how you'd have responded if instead of our usual small group discussion, I'd invited you to wash one another's feet? My own experience of foot-washing in the Christian church has been hugely positive: for many years I was a member of a congregation where foot washing was done once every three months at an evening communion meal.

Unfailingly it was a moving and humbling experience of working out what it meant to be community together. But for many of us, we identify with Peter's initial reaction to the idea: 'No way, thank you.'

How are we to understand this story? Sam Wells' helpfully suggests that it is an enactment of the incarnation. In such a reading, the table is seen as representing heaven, the outer robe which Jesus sheds represents letting go of the trappings of divinity, and the towel represents the human nature that Jesus takes on in the incarnation. Jesus' ministry is represented by the foot-washing, and there's also teaching, prophecy, questioning, command, controversy and confrontation, all features of the gospel story. Then Jesus' resumption of his place at the table represents his exaltation at the right hand of the Father in heaven. What we've got then, is the gospel in miniature.

If we remember the context of this story, coming after the story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet with nard, and wiping his feet with her hair, as an act of preparation for his death, we can see that this is a story about Jesus preparing his disciples – preparing us – for death. Unless we're willing to die with Jesus, we can't expect to share in his resurrection: that's what Jesus tells Peter. Peter's response that he wants Jesus to wash his hands and head also draws out that there is an important distinction between foot-washing and baptism. Baptism is a once-only action that prepares us for life – hence 'one who has bathed does not need to wash'. But while we only need baptism once, we need regular cleansing from the sin that accumulates in our lives – hence we need foot-washing regularly. Yes, we need

Jesus to wash our feet; but we're also commanded by him to wash one another's feet. Sam Wells calls this getting into the habit of preparing one another for death.

For if we are really to follow Jesus, if we are to be his real disciples, then we too shall have to endure the cross, just as he did. This may not mean literally having to face martyrdom, as some have had to endure. It may mean being humiliated or ridiculed for our faith. It may mean missing out on promotion, or even losing a job. It may mean restrictions on what we can say, or how our children are educated. This isn't an attractive road. But part of the strength for the journey will come from being part of a community where we wash one another's feet. Where we show practical love for one another. Where we bear with one another, and challenge one another. Where we give our lives for one another. Where we wash one another's feet.

While this is about truly serving one another, it's not about denying our power. As John reminds us, in Jesus' case he washes his disciples' feet 'knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,'. Jesus knew the power he had; but he chose to use that power in an unexpected way. So this indicates that the call is not to become grovelling worms; but mindful of the power we do have, to use that power in the service of others.

This all suggests a level of intimacy with one another, and a pattern of exposure to one another and to God that can seem deeply uncomfortable in our individualised, consumerist culture. This uncomfortableness is what Peter expresses for us in the gospel story. We'd like it to be another way, not this way. It's this moment of protest which Tintoretto captures in this painting.

And perhaps this uncomfortableness around physical foot-washing is one reason why most churches practice it so little, despite Jesus' clear injunction to do so, and despite his clear promise of blessing when we do so. What will it take for us to reengage with the practice of foot-washing in our church?

A prayer

Father of all, who revealed your humility in the incarnation and ministry of your Son Jesus Christ; grant that we might learn to wash one another's feet, by showing practical love for one another, by bearing with one another, and by challenging one another. Fill us afresh with the spirit of Jesus. **Amen**