An Old Legend

December 26th, 2021

 An old legend says that King Wenceslas was a good king, a man who went out at night to deliver provisions to the afflicted, the imprisoned, the poor. Most of these stories originated within a few decades of his death, and notable commentators of the time have affirmed them. It is not impossible that Wenceslas turned to the church and to piety after the horrors suffered as a young man. Though his mother Drahomira had been baptized at birth, she was later hostile to the church, persecuting Christians in a reign of terror. Drahomira was also jealous of Ludmila of Bohemia, the grandmother who had raised and educated Wenceslas, and had her assassinated. After thirteen nobles rebelled and sent Drahomira into exile, Wenceslas began to reign as Duke of Bohemia. One notable thing during his reign was the importation of priests to teach the faith. His reign was marked by a difficult time with raids from the Franks and Magyars. Sadly, in 935, Wenceslas was murdered by his brother Boleslav and some other nobles. It is hard to believe that all of his life story is just hagiography. Legends and chronicles record a remarkable ruler who contrasted with the norm of the time. Though the details may be debatable, Wenceslas stood out in the social memory of the people. Shortly after his death, he was venerated. As one chronicler, Cosmas of Prague, says: “But his deeds I think you know better than I could tell you; for, as is read in his *Passion*, no one doubts that, rising every night from his noble bed, with bare feet and only one chamberlain, he went around to God’s churches and gave alms generously to widows, orphans, those in prison and afflicted by every difficulty, so much so that he was considered, not a prince, but the father of all the wretched.”

 In our time, we need to remember those who have done good, those who have given us signposts of light throughout history, whoever they are. I mention a 10th Century Bohemian king because he is associated with this day, which is the Feast of Stephen. Another king, with a very strange kingdom, also left an indelible impression on history—Jesus of Nazareth. Besides the unique events of his life—His nativity, baptism, transfiguration, miracles, teachings, death, resurrection and ascension, I believe the character of Jesus—who he was and what he did—was simply unforgettable. Whoever followed in his footsteps saw this, and preserved it—not just in memory but in imitation. The apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians: “…Christ is all and in all! As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:11-17). All of the virtues Paul describes are the virtues that Jesus displayed. There really is no gospel message if we do not practice these things; we cannot remember Christ nor be like Christ without them.

 The nativity of Christ is an integral part of the gospels. Three gospels mention it—even if the third reference is very oblique and quiet on the details. The only gospel not to mention the nativity, the Gospel of Mark, still hints at it, when the people of Nazareth say: ““Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?” (Mark 6:3). In the gospels, men are usually called by their patronymics—names indicating who their fathers were, as when Jesus says calls Peter “Simon son of Jonah” (Matthew 16:17). To call Jesus the “Son of Mary” might indicate that she was widowed, but that is a stretch. Patronymics do not change when a father passes away. There was something unique about Mary, about her narrative and the birth of Jesus, that prompted relatives and neighbours in Nazareth to call Jesus “Son of Mary”. The nativity haunts even the Gospel of Mark. Five times someone in the text explicitly speaks of Jesus as Son of God (Mark 1:1, Mark 1:11, Mark 1:7, Mark 9:7, Mark 15:39). One parable and one rhetorical question hint at his divine sonship (Mark 12:1-12, 12:35-37), and Jesus himself confesses that he is the son of God before the Council (Mark 14:60-62). And it is precisely for confessing that he is the Son of God that Jesus is condemned by the Council and crucified. For Mark, the nativity is less about the colorful images I like with angels, shepherds and magi. The nativity for Mark is about *who* Jesus is—and thus the very first line of the gospel proclaims his subject matter: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). The word “beginning” in Greek is Ἀρχὴ (*arche*) whence we get the word *archaeology.* It has the strong connotation of the origin of all things—not just a beginning in time—as noted in ancient philosophers like Anaximander. Not only are we told what the beginning is, we are told that it has come! The beginning is not far back in time anymore—it is here! In the son of God! The gospel of Mark is the narrative about the son of God—the one born as the son of God.

The other gospels also tell us who Jesus is, but they are also more explicit in the *how* and *why* of the nativity. The Gospel of John says: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth…The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:14-18). For John, Jesus is born to reveal God and the grace of God. The Gospel of Matthew speaks of the coming of salvation and the fact that God will join humanity in the human experience; the angel says: “‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’” (Matthew 1:20-23). Lastly, we have the gospel of Luke—the favourite for nativity stories. Again, the angel is the messenger explaining why Jesus will be born: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’… ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (Luke 2:30-35). For Luke, divine sonship, kingship and kingdom are all present here. Again, history is going to be radically transformed—“Of his kingdom there will be no end.” It is message of hope.

The nativity was thus the first step in the full revelation of God to humanity in history. One can interpret the gospels in different ways, but one cannot change what the gospels said two thousand years ago. There are no anonymous gospels, contrary to what some scholars claimed. As Brant Pitre says: “The earliest and best copies of the four Gospels are unanimously attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There is absolutely no manuscript evidence—and thus no actual historical evidence—to support the claim that ‘originally’ the Gospels had no titles. In light of this complete lack of anonymous copies, New Testament scholar Martin Hengel writes: Let those who deny the great age and therefore the basic originality of the Gospel superscriptions in order to preserve their ‘good’ critical conscience give a better explanation of the completely unanimous and relatively early attestation of these titles, their origin and the names of the authors associated with them. Such an explanation has yet to be given, and it never will be” (Brant Pitre, The Case for Jesus. New York: Image, 2016. 18). Brant Pitre goes further, saying: “The four Gospels are not just any kind of ancient biography. They are historical biographies, two of which explicitly claim to tell us what Jesus actually did and said and to be based on eyewitness testimony (Luke 1:1-4, John 21:20-24)” (Pitre, 77). The gospels are thus historical claims that the son of God was born, that He lived among us, and that at the very least, he left us with a knowable personality and character. What is more, He is still living because he rose from death. The nativity is already pointing to our second birth.

All of this might seem tangential to my starting points—an old Bohemian king and a letter from a 1st Century Roman Jewish scholar describing the good life. I would argue that they cannot be separated. The gospels are about the son of God who came to transform us, to save us, to be with us. Christmas is about the son of God and how the son of God lived and called us to live. And if I rewrote Paul’s letter a little bit, this is what we would read: “Christ is all and in all! As God’s chosen one, holy and beloved, Jesus clothed himself with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Jesus bears with others and, if anyone has a complaint against him, forgives others…Above all, Jesus clothed himself with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And Jesus let peace rule in his heart, to which indeed all are called in the one body. And Jesus was and is thankful. Jesus allowed the word of God to dwell in him richly; he teaches and admonishes in all wisdom; and with gratitude in his heart he sings psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever Jesus does, in word or deed, he does everything giving thanks to God the Father.” Though I believe it was the miraculous and divine that made Jesus the way he is, I believe that it is also His character that makes the miraculous and divine all the more believable. There are thousands of stories of miracles throughout human history—most of them forgotten. And yet, the nativity and the resurrection of Jesus still haunt us because the goodness of Jesus still haunts us and invites us to be radically refashioned into his very own goodness.

There are days when the handprints of God shimmer all over creation and history in glorious clarity. And there are days when there is “no light; but rather darkness visible,” to quote John Milton (*Paradise Lost*), when it is hard to see God and to follow Christ. It is on days like that when we should remember the old legend of the Bohemian king. As John Mason Neale wrote in his retelling of the old legend, there was a night when the snow was thick and the king’s page felt like it was impossible to go on: “‘My liege,’ he said, ‘I cannot go on. The wind freezes my very blood. Pray you, let us return.’ ‘Seems it so much?’ asked the King. ‘Was not His journey from Heaven a wearier and a colder way than this?’ Otto answered not. ‘Follow me on still,’ said S. Wenceslaus. ‘Only tread in my footsteps, and you will proceed more easily.’ The servant knew that his master spoke not at random. He carefully looked for the footsteps of the King: he set his own feet in the print of his lord's feet.’” (John Mason Neale. *Deeds of Faith: Stories for Children from Church History*. 1849). And thus the page followed wherever the footsteps of the Bohemian king had melted the snow. In the darkness and snow of our lives, may we follow the footprints of the King of Kings, clothed in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, forgiving one another and bearing with one another, and doing everything in the name of the Lord Jesus with hearts full of thanks to God the Father. And thus our path forward shall be known; and thus shall our path forward shall be illuminated.