
Christ the Camera

John 1.14

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 24, 2007 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I have a friend who gives the same Christmas present to his wife every year. Round about the beginning of December he gathers together all the photographs he's taken over the previous twelve months and picks out a dozen that he likes the most. He then arranges them in a frame, and writes in the number 2007, or whatever the year is. Finally he chooses the one picture that sums up the whole year and puts it in the middle and fits a glass on the frame and wraps it up and lays it under the Christmas tree. His dining room is now crowded with a constellation of memories. He somehow uses his camera to order his world, to shape his memories, and to identify the heart of things. That camera is the real center of his life.

The gospel writers do something quite similar when they arrange a host of visual images in a kind of a circle within the frame of the Christmas story. The Christmas story isn't so much the highlights of zero B.C., or 4 B.C. or 8 B.C. or whatever year it was – it's more like the highlights of world history. Think for a moment about the photographs that are gathered round the outside of the frame.

Think first of all about creation itself. That's got to be one of the highlights. The God who made the heavens and the earth gives us a little reminder by setting a star in motion to cross the sky and lead the magi to the stable. So we start with a photograph of the star, to show us that God is the God of science and the universe and all the galaxies and black holes and big bangs.

And then there's Herod. Other politicians are mentioned in the Christmas story, including the Emperor Augustus and the Governor Quirinius. But the photograph has to be of Herod, the half-Jewish jealous puppet king, furious at news of a pretender to his throne, and showing us that this is a story about politics, about power, about alliances and about uneasy heads that wear a crown. In Herod's photograph we see that God has always been involved in politics, but seldom in the way that those who are in charge want him to be.

And then there's the wise men themselves. Here's a third photograph, to show us what religion and philosophy can do. These magi are people who had spent their lives pondering the inner and outer mysteries of the universe, and the summit of their searchings took them across the desert of human ignorance to the very threshold of God's revelation. The picture shows us that other religions and philosophy can take us to Jerusalem, but not quite to Bethlehem. They can take us to the throne, but not to the manger. Close – but not quite there. The picture of the wise men shows us the best that historical human endeavor can achieve.

And of course there's the shepherds. Here are a group of people at the bottom of the social pile. Their kind of work excluded them from the religious rituals of cleansing and eating that separated out the holy from the unwashed. They were dirty, uneducated, and generally despised. But the shepherds' photograph in our Christmas frame shows their faces lit up by the angels' light, their hearts lifted high by the amazing news, their tongues singing with the joy now come to the world. This picture shows us that God is closest to those the world keeps at a distance.

And don't forget Joseph. He is a man who dreams. His photograph ought to show him asleep, because four times, like his Genesis namesake with the technicolor dreamcoat, he dreams. He dreams that the child is God's son. He dreams that Herod means trouble and Egypt's the best place to run to. He dreams that it's time to come home. And he dreams that Nazareth has the cheapest real estate these days. And the photograph shows us that God works through the conscious and the subconscious, that the nether world of dreams just as much as the concrete world of reality is the theatre of God's glory.

Next to Joseph has to be the photograph of Mary. Here we see an open mouth when the angel appears, an open mind when the angel talks tall, an open heart to be the handmaid of the Lord, and finally, though hidden for modesty's sake, an open womb in which a new creation can begin to take shape. And Mary's photograph shows us that God isn't just the God of science and politics and philosophy and the supernatural and social justice,

but that God is the God of family drama, of unforeseen pregnancy and paternal jealousy and community embarrassment and the mundane and glorious experience of a young woman bringing a child into the world.

And then finally there's the angels. One comes to Zechariah. One comes to Mary. One comes to Elizabeth. First one, then a whole multitude come to the shepherds. Now that's what I call a spectacular photograph. And what do these angel photographs tell us? They show us that God is orchestrating an extraordinary symphony, a unique drama in which all kinds and manners of people, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, male and female, ruler and oppressed, and indeed the whole created order is constellated around one event, one definitive event.

And the truth is that none of these photographs is the central picture. They're all the pictures that are arranged around the image that says it all. And that central photograph is not a grand mathematical theorem or an as-yet unseen intergalactical phenomenon. That central photograph is not of an elected president or a self-aggrandizing tyrant. That central photograph is not of a great philosophical breakthrough or a meeting of the world's religious leaders. That central photograph is not of a march for justice or an act of social protest. That central photograph is not of an inspiring dream, for this country or for the world. That central photograph is not even of a person for once faithful to God's will.

That central photograph is of a baby. A baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in an animal's feeding trough. Christianity is certainly about all the things portrayed in the other photographs – it's about science, it's about politics, it's about philosophy, it's about justice, it's about dreaming dreams, it's about faithful discipleship and it's about God working in history. But fundamentally Christianity begins here – with a tiny baby.

And that baby changes the way we think about science, because here at the heart of things is vulnerable, fragile, human life and human relationship. All the battles about science and religion seem to miss this tiny baby at the center of it all. And that baby changes the way we think about politics, because the way God exercises power, when he has all the power in the universe at his disposal, is by coming among us as a defenseless baby. And that baby changes the way we think about philosophy, because at the end of all our ponderings and wonderings there is not an idea but a child, not a word, but soft, infant flesh. And that baby changes the way we think about justice because the way God calls for justice is not with a campaign on the streets or a bill in Congress but with a piercing cry and an insatiable need for milk. And that baby changes the way we think about dreams because now all our dreams are focused on what this child has brought us. And that baby changes the way we think about discipleship because now we see that caring for babies, caring for refugee and displaced babies, caring for babies arising from unexpected pregnancies and bringing about social embarrassment, caring for babies amid violence and hatred and hardship and fear is the way we worship the God we find in this central photograph, the God we meet in this baby.

God creeps into the hostile territory of human life under the radar. God comes not with an earthquake or in a spaceship or after a lightning flash or at the end of a bloodthirsty battle. God enters his own drama in the most tiny, most ordinary, and yet most conventionally miraculous way of all – through an everyday but still breathtaking human birth. Jesus is born in much the same way in which he dies. He is naked. He is laid on wood. His arms are restrained so that he cannot even scratch his face. And there are no more than a couple of friends or relatives there to mark the momentous occasion. This is an awesome drama, but its awe lies not in its wide screen, but in the intensity by which the whole history and meaning and purpose of creation are concentrated in this precious moment, this tiny body, these vital relationships, this vulnerable life.

Think with me once again about the camera for a moment. I was never the most conscientious student of physics, but one lesson from eighth grade has stayed with me all these years. We made a pinhole camera. On one side of the camera was the whole world – of trees and cars and buildings and people. On the other side was a camera film. In between was a piece of cardboard. And in the center of the cardboard was a tiny, almost invisible hole. And what happened was that somehow all the light from the world outside got transported through that tiny hole and reproduced an image on the camera film a few inches beyond it. But the image was the wrong way up (because light travels in straight lines) so the light from the top of the building ended up at the bottom of the image. I remember my physics teacher saying that pinhole cameras require longer exposure

times than other cameras – sometimes several seconds, sometimes several hours. I was such a poor student of physics that in my case maybe 30 years would have been a better estimate.

But here's the mystery of the incarnation – the wonder of Christmas. Christ is the camera. The baby Jesus is that pinhole. All the myriad diversity and extent of the universe, its science, its politics, its philosophy, its struggle for freedom, its dreams, its faithfulness – all of that is concentrated in this tiny baby, this almost invisible fleshly presence. And all the wondrous diversity and extent of God is in this baby too. And this baby, this pinhole in which is concentrated all the light that enlightens the world, does an extraordinary thing. This baby takes the light of the world, takes all the science and the politics and the wonder and the struggle and all the rest, and turns them upside down. This baby turns the world upside down. This baby is the image of the invisible God, as St Paul calls him. This baby is eternity in an instant. This baby overturns every image and reality and certainty the world ever had.

My friend had it just right having a camera at the center of his life, and he had it just right each Christmas gathering a constellation of pictures around one central picture. But God has a slightly different camera and slightly different pictures. Christ is the camera. The tiny, vulnerable baby is the image that takes the wondrous extent of the whole world and turns every tiny piece of it upside down. That's the good news of Christ's incarnation. That's the good news of Christmas.

Oh, and there's one more thing about that camera, about that central image, about that Jesus, about that tiny, swaddled, vulnerable, pinholed baby. It needs a long exposure time. You need to give it a very, very long exposure time. Happy Christmas.