

'The story' – whether in the sacred sense, or in the secular understanding - holds a very special place in most cultures. Talking of stories, here in Ireland we have been reopening, painfully, our island stories in the past Decade of Commemorations of 1912-1922. Going back to 'the story', here, in Ireland, it is regarded as a specific literary form: 'the Irish short story.' A good story needs a storyteller, and that person will communicate what she/he considers the listener needs to hear, to know the truth, to be fully informed.

I expect many of these same principles came into the reckoning when, inspired by God the Holy Spirit, each of the four evangelists began to write his account of the Gospel. The diversity in interpretation is seen in their respective accounts of the Birth of Jesus. If we may consider Saint John, first, the beginning of his Gospel account, the Prologue, is one of the most loved and most meaningful passages in the entire Bible: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God..." Those inspirational words point to the fact that Jesus, the Word, the Son of God, is fully God. He has always existed, he was involved in creation and, amazingly, as we reflect on the reality of our celebration on the Festival of Christmas, he came and lived among us. He was one of us. Notice this, however: there are not any mentions of a manger, a star, wise men, or angels. Saint John's Gospel was the last of the four to be written, incidentally.

The first Gospel to be written was that of Saint Mark, and he starts right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and does not make any mention of his birth or childhood. Saint Matthew, and Saint Luke, both tell us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and that his mother, Mary, was a virgin when she gave birth. But these are the only episodes of the nativity story in which the two accounts converge. We have Saint Matthew to thank for the appearance of an angel to Joseph in a dream, the three wise men following the star from the east, and Herod's infamous massacre of the innocents. Saint Luke does not mention any of these. Instead, it's from Luke that we learn that "an angel of the Lord" appeared before some shepherds "keeping watch over their flock by night", that Mary and Joseph were forced to travel to Bethlehem to be counted in a Roman census, and that Jesus was laid in a manger.

As the Irish theologian, and former leader of the Corrymeela Community at Ballycastle in County Antrim, Padhraig O Tuama, points out, Saint Luke's Gospel does not record a reference to a stable, to animals, and, most importantly, there is not any reference to lack of hospitality. Saint Luke, normally so kind and gracious, giving so much time to stories of the marginalised, simply describes Jesus' birth as taking place when Mary and Joseph had gone to Bethlehem for the census, and that Jesus was laid in a manger.

Padhraig O Tuama further points out that there is a deeper feature to this story, one of kind hospitality, which is, at best, never reckoned on, or, at worst, denied in our accounts of this story – and let us remember the place of kind hospitality in Irish culture. We are told by Saint Luke that there was not any room for Mary and Joseph 'in the inn'. When we hear the word, 'inn' we tend to think of a resting house, with an owner, and rooms, rather like a medieval hostel in which it would have been possible to rest one's horses and seek accommodation for the night. The Greek word for this was 'pandocheion', and, interestingly, it was to such a place that the Good Samaritan brought the man who had been attacked and robbed. The 'inn' in which Jesus

was born, however, was a 'kataluma', which was a different form of accommodation altogether. Most people lived in this type of one-room structure which provided space for living and sleeping, and a fire place, and into which the animals were brought at night for protection and also because of the warmth they would give. Houses which had a kataluma had an additional upper room. This room, the kataluma, the upper room, could be rented out, rather like the ancient world's equivalent of Eir B& B! Joseph and Mary, arriving in Bethlehem, could not find a kataluma. They were in Bethlehem because that's where Joseph's kinsfolk were. So, Mary had the baby and they laid him in the manger. The manger would have been where mangers always were: in the living space of a family, a family who made room for Joseph, Mary and Jesus in their own home. Presumably they were relatives of Joseph.

This is much more ordinary, much less dramatic. Through misunderstanding, misinterpretation of this account, the people of the Holy Land at that time earned a reputation – in hindsight, wrongly - of turning away a husband, and his wife in the last stages of pregnancy. To this day, according to sources, people of the Holy Land are aghast at how this story is related in other cultures. The way the story is told reveals so much – stars and angels, joy and delight, but also, lack of hospitality, cruelty, unintended insult, and limitation. Incidentally, Saint Luke's story of the kataluma continues. At the end of the gospel, kataluma arises once again. Jesus and his friends meet for a meal — a last supper — and this time, he makes it to the kataluma, an “upper room”.

As Padhraig O Tuama emphasises, there is a need, as never before, and not least as we on this island approach 2022, to relate our stories accurately, remembering that it is incorrect to think that Mary and Joseph were forced into a stable. They found shelter in the kindness of people, presumably Joseph's kin in his traditional homeland of Bethlehem. This kindness was so ordinary, so expected, so taken for granted that Luke, the gentle evangelist, did not even make mention of the family whose home was used for Jesus' birth.

Taking care with the story can make a world of difference. To tell the story in one way implies something about the character of people in Bethlehem at the time — that they would send a woman to a stable to give birth. Exploring a little more deeply into the accuracy of the original account, we might realise that every moment of human encounter, every small demonstration of hospitality carries within it, as the writer stresses, the possibility for incarnation.

The message which is emerging is startling - and it is good that it is. We all have our stories to tell. They must be related with openness, honesty, integrity and sensitivity, and in context. And as we expect others to listen to them, we must in turn give full hearing to their stories. In Ireland this coming year, the centenary of the setting up of the Irish Free State in 1922, and the Civil War, doubtless will be commemorated. The concept of partition has now raised its questioning head again, not least because of the Brexit vote fall-out, and, interwoven amongst all that, the now thorny issue of the still unresolved Northern Ireland 'Protocol' on the one hand, and certain voices stridently seeking a Border Poll, on the other hand.

As in the Christmas Gospel stories, in both Saint Matthew and Saint Luke, the prominent role which fear plays is always striking. The angel says to Joseph, when he learns that Mary is expecting a baby, “Do not be afraid.” There's Zechariah's fear when he is informed that Elizabeth is expecting, Herod's fear of a rival king, and the fear of the Wise Men to return and

tell Herod. Instead, 'they return home, by another way.' The question can be asked, 'Do those words not only refer to their own personal safety, but also to the fact of having encountered the Incarnate Christ, they now see life, its relationships, and its objective in a wholly 'other' way?'

As we celebrate the Birth of Jesus, instead of succumbing to fear, doubt and despair, in the power of the Incarnate Lord, and in the light which he brings to the world, we are called to remember our identity as people of hope. Our hope is a joyful hope, rooted not in a naive hoping for the best, eyes closed, fingers crossed, but rooted in the Person of Jesus and his holy Incarnation as Emmanuel – God with us. It is rooted in his teaching and his active witness to the forgiving, generous character of God. And our hope is also rooted in Jesus' death and resurrection, which he promises will be our pattern too, when our time comes.

In the power of the Incarnate Lord, can we work together to make the year ahead, 2022, to be a year of renewed hope and distinct new possibilities? If we can, a 'kairos' moment of fresh opportunity can be created, not only to reflect on where we have come from in our differing island 'stories', but also to think afresh as to what we can all yet be, and become, as people living on, and sharing, this island together. The coming of the Prince of Peace is the promise of the 'new dawn', always lifting our sights, enhancing our vision, and re-kindling hope in long-expectant, anxious and human hearts and minds, both here and all over the face of the earth.

Christians, and all those of goodwill, in Ireland are ever called and challenged on this island to sacramentalise and live out their specific identity as being agents of hope, and of restorative healing. This task requires tireless engagement in expressing our stories - the more frequently the better - while seeking the healing of painful past memories, individual and community, through speaking, and relating - **but never, ever, without listening in return.** By that method and means, we can move forward, with greater confidence, on this island, on into 2022, with renewed vision and fresh hope, and not remain stuck up a cul-de-sac, or at a stand-still, always looking in the rear-view mirror.

In conclusion, I invite you now to reflect with me on this distinctly relevant two-way conversation from the poem, *Narrative Theology*, by Padhraig O Tuama.

And I said to him
Are there answers to all of this?
And he said
The answer is in a story
and the story is being told.

And I said
But there is so much pain
And she answered, plainly,
Pain will happen.

Then I said
Will I ever find meaning?
And they said
You will find meaning
Where you give meaning.

The answer is in the story
And the story isn't finished.

