

**CHRISTMAS EVE – LATE
MATTHEW 1...STORY...**

A cousin sent me DVDS picturing many of our relatives. Staring out from those faded photographs were people who formed my life, but what was missing behind the smiles was any narrative. I wished I could hear their stories again to better understand who they were. What were their hopes and dreams, their fears and struggles? How did they view their world? What did they do, how did they live life or face death?

As human beings our stories are incredibly important. Consider how much of our technological world is used to tell stories. Facebook, email, Twitter, cell phones are all instruments by which we tell our stories; “That person did this, and this is what happened to me, and that is what I did,” and so on. All human beings have their stories and it is the stories that define how we see life.

Each Christmas we come face to face with a story, now over 20 centuries old. It has been passed on to each generation, retold in Sunday school pageants, sung about in concerts, preached about in gatherings, written on catacomb walls, spoken of in every culture, and held as sacred by 1/3 of the world’s population. The characters are familiar enough; a young couple away from home; surprised shepherds in a dark night; royal magi on a road trip; angelic messengers. We know this story by heart.

The challenge we face each Christmas is listening to this story as though it wasn’t familiar, as though we were hearing it for the first time. We are asked to listen not only with our ears but believing again that somehow, some way, this story has and still is making a difference in the world since it was first told. If our stories help define our lives, then this story of Christmas should help us understand what life is about and for.

To many, however, Christmas is only a story. Atheists paid for a billboard placed at the entrance to New York City’s Holland Tunnel, picturing a nativity scene with the words “You know it’s a myth. This season, celebrate reason.” If nothing else the atheists have only put into words what many in our

culture are thinking. Trained by the internet to interpret truth only by what can be proved by empirical fact, the Christmas story is too much of a stretch. Nothing about it is logical enough to satisfy a 21st century mind

Just as we pick apart the headlines in our search for truth, people pick apart the Christmas story too. Many will even go to church somewhere and listen politely to the words, but only as a fond story of imagination not as a story of interest. As a culture, we have lost any sense of mystery, and truth is a well-tabulated list of facts. Without being able to believe in something beyond that which we know, our life becomes one-dimensional. Trusting only in reason makes us miss much of what life has to offer.

There is, however, a great deal to life that cannot simply be proved by measurable facts. Does someone love you tonight? If so how do you know? Is it by what they do for you or is there something deeper that allows you trust their love? What attracts you to them or what attracts them to you? Is it simply well-proportioned plumbing in the right places or is there something about their spirit or attitude that catches your attention? Most of the things that make life worth living are not things proved on a spreadsheet.

The Christmas story invites us into something deeper than ourselves, to consider a God beyond us. It invites us to not stretch our mind but to open our heart to the possibility of a love deeper and richer than any we might know here. In truth, we are in this story-standing behind Mary and Joseph, magi and shepherds. God came into this world for us, so that we might truly know we have purpose and value, a beginning and a destination.

If you are willing to see yourself in this story, then everything about our living and dying becomes different. When her father died, Donna Egolf was asked by several well-meaning people, "Did your father know the Lord?" Donna's response was, "Whether my dad knew the Lord or not is not nearly as important as that the Lord knew my dad." This is what the Christmas story is all about, a God

claiming us in baptism forever, a God who travels with us wherever our story in life takes us, a God we can count on and trust in even if we cannot always figure out what this God is up to.

In response to the atheists' billboard message: "You know it's a myth", a group of Catholics put up a billboard at the exit to the Holland Tunnel saying "You know it is real." Here, then, is the choice we make at Christmas; to refute everything about its story because it doesn't make sense, or to accept the story-without getting hung up on the details- and the incredibly good news that it brings. Listen to the story, see yourself in it, and rejoice!

+ Deo Gracia +