

CHRISTMAS DAY ADDRESS 2019: THE SOURCE THAT BECKONED

Posted on December 25, 2019 by Andrew Brown



'The Nativity at Night' (1490) by Geertgen tot Sint Jans

READINGS:

['Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, 13 July 1798' by William Wordsworth \(this morning we began the service by hearing the first two stanzas\).](#)

[Luke 2:1-20](#)

ADDRESS

The Source that Beckoned

For those of us who have become profoundly sceptical about the historicity of the nativity stories and the many naive, theologically realist meanings given to them by the Christian tradition, one of the simplest ways creatively to enter back into the living spirit of the stories is to remember that they were not written as **descriptions** of an actual event real or imagined.

To many people this may seem to be bit of an odd thing to say since the stories have gifted us what is an utterly unforgettable and iconic mise-en-scène — literally a ‘placing on stage’ — in the form of the classic nativity scene which is reproduced in paintings, plays and models around the world.

Our back-reading of these stories over some two-thousand years have made them stories seem to us so obviously to be descriptions of this mise-en-scène that we have utterly lost sight of something which was of central importance to their writers, traditionally named Matthew and Luke.



One of four views of Tintern Abbey by Frederick Calbert (1815)

To help you sense what this ‘something’ is (or might be) I need to bring before you the insightful reading of Wordsworth’s poem ‘Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, 13 July 1798’ made by the British contemporary philosopher and Buddhist, [Michael McGhee](#). Here are the poem’s opening eight lines again:

Five years have passed; five summers, with the length

Of five long winters! And again I hear

*These waters, rolling from their mountain springs
With a soft inland murmur. Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
Which on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion, and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.*

McGhee observes that the point:

*. . . is not that the steep and lofty cliffs should stimulate the idea of a more deep seclusion than the greatest that can be imagined, but that the scenery speaks for, is correspondent with, the possibility of a state of mind and it is **that** which, if it achieves reality, becomes the object of further comparison . . . [the state of mind] beckons towards deeper experience which in turn resonates with the words: indeed we discover the source of the resonance that beckoned ([Michael McGhee: Transformations of the Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice, CUP 2000, p. 126, his emphasis](#))*

I realise that this is quite a difficult paragraph to understand, especially on a first hearing but the key thing to grasp is that McGhee thinks Wordsworth has felt that the physical scene before him corresponds in some powerful way with his ‘state of mind’ and his associated insights into how the world is and his place in it. Wordsworth writes about the landscape, therefore, not in order to describe it to us as a writer of a straightforward guide book might try to do, but in order to set up the possibility that it will resonate with us in a similar fashion such that it brings about in us what he hopes will be the same (or at least very similar) state of mind.

I cannot emphasise enough that the point here is ‘the state of mind’ not the description of the landscape scene. Wordsworth’s wider hope is that if his poem can help this state of mind achieve a certain reality for both him and we the reader then we can begin to talk with each other about **that**, and this is something we can do anywhere, even ‘in lonely rooms, and ‘mid the din / Of towns and cities.’

His further hope is that by comparing our different experiences of this state of mind we will both be beckoned towards a deeper experience which continues to resonate with the words of the poem and which, ultimately, may help us, as Wordsworth thought, ‘into the life of things’ and so, perhaps, discover **the source** of the resonance that beckoned.

In this poem ‘the source’ seems to be something that is pantheistic in nature, perhaps something akin to [Spinoza’s ‘deus sive natura’, god-or-nature](#), whom we evoke at the beginning of every morning service here. In any case, as Wordsworth says Aside from this, for us ‘with an eye made

quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy' we are, he feels, able to 'see into the life of things' and experience, as some lines later in the poem tell us, 'a sense sublime . . .

*Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.*

On a very day to day practical level Wordsworth felt that all this could bring to us
*that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened.*

Anyway, it has long seemed to me highly likely that the writers of the nativity stories were attempting to achieve something similar.

The stories were written because in observing the process that leads up to and includes the birth of any child (not Jesus himself, of course, for the writers were writing many years after Jesus actual birth of which there is absolutely no first-hand account) the authors had themselves experienced 'certain conditions in which their minds were set in motion' (p. 124) which, to quote [William James](#) from his '[Varieties of Religious Experience](#)', allowed 'something [to] well up in the inner reaches of their consciousness' (William James quoted by McGhee p. 17). The authors then tried to communicate this whole experience to us through means of 'aesthetic ideas and images' centred on this person called Jesus; in other words they 'gave us an approximation of this experience and, in so doing, gave it the semblance of objective reality' (McGhee p. 119) — namely a child who was god, a god who was a child, a god who is in the world with us ([Immanuel](#)), and our world which, all in all, is in god.

But whether my personal sense of their state of mind is right or wrong, the semblance of objective reality they gave their state of mind were, without doubt, their respective (and actually

very different) nativity scenes. The problem for those of us, in a rational, freethinking, [Radical Enlightenment](#) inspired church tradition such as this, stems from the fact that the semblances the writers created were so stunning and attractive that over the intervening two-thousand years their aesthetic ideas and images have all too often degenerated into forms of naive theological realism within our culture.

As an intellectual and religious community we have, quite rightly, rejected all such naive theological realisms and this was a very good, and very necessary, thing to do. But the downside of our protestations, and I think it is a significant downside, is that at Christmas (and, actually in many other situations) we have been too quickly led to dismiss stories — like those about the nativity — as being nothing more than pretty but ultimately meaningless and dispensable faulty **descriptions** of the world.

But what might emerge for us if we could reconnect with the thought that perhaps the writers of the nativity stories (and other examples of religious stories) were not trying to describe or explain things in naive, theologically realist ways, but simply trying to communicate to us a certain, ultimately shared, state of mind?

That seems right to me and so I'd encourage you to contemplate this thought further in the coming months and years.

All I can say on this, as on most Christmas mornings, is that the resonances set up by the steep and lofty cliffs above Tintern Abbey create in me a state of mind that seems strongly related to the resonances set up by looking at the nativity scenes and the associated state of mind they help create in me.

As I read and look at the nativity scene, especially in the picture [‘The Nativity at Night’ \(1490\) by Geertgen tot Sint Jans](#) — where, you will see, he has left an empty space by the crib-side in the central foreground so you can yourself join the holy family, assorted angels and ox and donkey in pondering the Christ-child — my state of mind can only be described, as I have already indicated, as pantheistic in a way close to that talked about by Spinoza, and so I cannot but help see before me in the Christmas mise-en-scène a motion and a spirit, that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things.

Was this what the gospel writers actually intended? Was their state of mind and my own the same? I cannot, of course, ever know for sure.

But of one thing I can be absolutely sure. We must never be seduced into thinking that the nativity stories can be reduced to being naive theological realisms. That we are here together this morning indicates that in the nativity stories **there is** a hum of a creative, natural energy with which we can/do resonate.

So go on, why not risk moving close to the crib once again and see what state of mind the resonance sets up in you? Perhaps, if we're attentive enough, we might still just sense ****the source**** of the resonance that beckoned and find 'that blessed mood, / In which the burthen of the mystery, / In which the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world, / Is lightened.

Happy Christmas to you all.