

For birth or death: the destiny of Bethlehem

The four Presidents of Churches Together in England, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Revd Dr Rowan Williams; the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor; Primate of the Armenian Church of Great Britain, Bishop Nathan Hovhannisian and the Free Churches Moderator, the Reverend David Coffey, are making a joint pilgrimage to Bethlehem 20-23 December 2006. In the following article, which originally appeared in *The Reader* magazine, Clare Amos, editor of rethinkingmission.org reflects on the destiny of Bethlehem, past, present and future.

I sometimes ask people if they are aware of where is the first point in the Bible that Bethlehem gets a mention. And that normally offers them quite a challenge. People certainly move back from the New Testament into the Old – and come up with responses like, ‘the story of David’, or ‘the Book of Ruth’. Good thinking. But actually the first mention of Bethlehem in our Bibles (as they are now set out) occurs much earlier still. You can find it in the Book of Genesis: Genesis 35.19 to be exact. When Jacob returns from ‘exile’, bringing with him his two wives, Leah and Rachel, Rachel goes into labour and gives birth to her second son, Benjamin, ‘when they were still some distance from Ephrath’. Though Benjamin is born safely Rachel herself (like so many women throughout past history), dies in childbirth. And the text then reads, ‘So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave.’

When I first realised this, I found it an extraordinarily powerful ‘coincidence’ (if that is an appropriate word), that the first biblical mention of Bethlehem, a town that we Christians so much associate with birth, should actually be in relation to a story about death – or rather a story about birth and death. Indeed other mentions of Bethlehem in scripture remind us of how close birth and death were. There is the story of Ruth which begins in Bethlehem – only then it is a place of famine which people leave to seek survival, and which ends too in the same town with the joyful birth of a son to Ruth. There is the poignant and beautiful oracle of Jeremiah in 31.15 which speaks of Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted ‘because they are no more’, an oracle quite is clearly alluded to Matthew’s account of the massacre of the innocent children of Bethlehem by Herod (*Matthew 2.18*), which itself is another example of birth and death drawn very close together in Bethlehem.

The four words ‘For birth or death?’ in the title are taken from TS Eliot’s well-known poem, *The Journey of the Magi*. Do you remember how the Magi ponder, towards the end of the poem, how they have encountered both birth and death in their journey? I was powerfully reminded of Eliot’s words years ago, when I was living in Jerusalem and visited Bethlehem on a bitterly cold February day, to find a funeral going on inside the church, with the coffin placed directly above the

Cave of the Nativity. Birth or death? A birth which foreshadows later suffering and death – yet it is only through such a death that new birth is made possible. Bethlehem is a place of paradox, a paradox wonderfully encapsulated in the entrance to the Church of the Nativity, which is an entrance so low that everyone needs to stoop down to pass through it. It expresses in stone the paradoxical truth of the incarnation – hymned more than 1500 years ago by St Ephrem: 'Blessed be the Child who today delights Bethlehem...
Glory to the Living One whose Son became a mortal;
Glory to the Great One whose Son descended and became small.'
(*Ephrem, Hymns on the Nativity*)

For me, one of the saddest aspects of the current tension and hostility in the Holy Land, is the particular problem faced by Bethlehem, which has suffered grievously and disproportionately from security measures and conflicts in recent years. In the 1970s, when I lived in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, even though under Israeli occupation, seemed a comparatively prosperous 'little town'. No longer. During the past five years the inhabitants of Bethlehem have known hardship, siege, poverty – and death, far more than birth. It is also a place that shows only too clearly how the demography in the Middle East is shifting – as Christian families who have lived in Bethlehem for centuries, perhaps almost since New Testament times, finally decide that they can no longer see a future there for themselves and their children, and leave for the West.

Many of the Christmas carols we sing which refer to Bethlehem I find too sweet – almost sickly – given the realities of today. But there is a lilting Christmas song (available in the Penguin Book of Carols) by Elizabeth Poston which has always expressed for me the intermingling of glory and the tragedy of Bethlehem. It includes the lines,
'O Bethlehem! Ancient of days, within thy story, heaven was laid.
O Bethlehem! Anguish must be the price of glory, for us he paid.'

One of the many ironies about Bethlehem is encapsulated in its very name. In semitic languages the word 'Beth' means 'House.' But the letters 'Lehem' can either be linked to a word which means 'Bread/Food' or another word which means 'War'. So the name Bethlehem can mean either 'House of Bread' or 'House of War'. The choice is for us, and for our world today: do we come to Bethlehem to be fed, receiving the bread of life – or do we turn our backs on the 'one of peace' (see *Micah 5.5*) and follow the dangerous path which leads to war?