

Trinity College Cambridge
29 January 2012

Scenes from the Life of Christ: Birth

Job 38: 1–21

Luke 2: 13–20

The Nativity: Piero della Francesca

The Bishop of Whitby

‘When the morning stars sang together’, Job 38: 7

‘God has made man the singer of his radiance’, Gregory Nazianzus

My admiration for Piero della Francesca was confirmed when he made it into the text of Alan Bennett’s *The History Boys*, where a bright pupil asserts that reference to just ‘Piero’ – without the other stuff – is the mark of real sophistication, a bit of a pose, like a reference to Dave – Cameron or Beckham, we might say, these days.

Piero’s Nativity is a late, unfinished work, painted between 1470–75, we don’t know who commissioned it and it’s now in the National Gallery, London.

What I want us to explore in this painting is the theme of music and creation.

You will notice that Piero uses his skill of draughtsmanship to slice the composition of the scene in half. From the top, we follow a diagonal line down the left hand edge of the roof of the rickety stable and along its internal shadow; this line is accentuated by the raised arm of the shepherd and the even stronger delineation of Mary’s blue mantle as it falls behind her.

On the right hand side of this line we see the signs of earthliness. First, there is Joseph, who is weary, sitting on the saddle that has come off ‘the little donkey’ of popular Christmas carol fame. With him are the shepherds, representatives of the human race, people of goodwill to whom the news of peace has been announced by singing angels. The shepherd might be pointing out to Joseph where the angels were, “up there, guv”, in a cockney sort of way. And in the distance of this temporal, earthly section we see the town of Bethlehem, looking very Tuscan, affluent, and attractive to the English tourist.

By contrast, on the left hand side of the diagonal line is the terrain of God’s restoration of the earth into a new creation, sharply differentiated by the grass, flowers and birds that surround the Christ child. Here the angel choir sings, while in the background a river irrigates the land, making it lush and verdant.

The figure of Mary, the virgin mother, intersects the dividing line between these two zones and dominates the scene. The light of heaven illuminates her face, showing exquisitely executed features of great beauty. Even the beasts – the ox and the ass – get the story line. The ass appears to be he-hawing in tune with the heavenly music, while the ox bends to the rhythm of the lutanists, looking as though the right hand peg box is pressing the ox's head down in reverent adoration. This draws from more than artistic imagination.

From at least the fourth century Christian iconography elaborates the account in Luke's gospel and applies an interpretation to the crib scene of a verse from the Prophet Isaiah: 'The ox knoweth his owner and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people do not consider' (Isaiah 1: 3) – a verse on which St Ambrose and Augustine comment, suggesting that the people of Israel, represented by the ox, are weighed down by the old Law.

As we look at the detail of definition in this unfinished work, we see that Piero seems to have given priority to the figures that form the core message in his imagination. The background scenes I've already mentioned. Then there's Joseph, exposing a weary foot – symbol of earthiness, who is dressed in the black of death but swathed with a rose pink garment suggestive of new life. This is the colour that Piero uses for the robe in which Jesus, newly acclaimed as the Christ, the beloved of God, is to be vested after his baptism (perhaps the best known of Piero's works in the National Gallery, London), and in which the risen Christ is vested as he steps out of the tomb in Piero's *Resurrection*, in the Museo Civico in San Sepolcro.

The heavenly angels are arranged in clear ranks of orders – two and one and two – their blue and white robes providing a symbolic colour scheme for Mary's own clothing. But Mary, drawing our attention to the word made flesh, is the central figure around whom the others gather.

She is already complete in Piero's unfinished composition, emerging with almost three dimensional clarity from the figures representing earthliness, and of whom she is one, but, as Wordsworth puts it, one who is 'out taint nature's solitary boast'.

In the structure of this painting's composition, Mary follows the pattern of humility that is the mark of God's behaving. The Christ child is laid on the earth – humus, in Latin, and the root form of the word for humility. God who becomes incarnate in time and space is God who reveals strength in weakness, limitation as the hook on which the gargantuan aspirations of evil are snared and thwarted.

In her worship of the word made flesh, Mary exemplifies the reversal of human rebellion against God described in the book Genesis, in which Adam and Eve's estrangement and the earth's own sense of disintegration are presented through carefully constructed paradigms. John Milton also describes this moment of the Fall in *Paradise Lost*, when profound shock is felt through the whole of the created order: 'Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat,/Sighing through all her works, gave signs of woe/that all was lost.'

What Piero now illuminates for us is the restoration of what had been lost. The nativity scene is not simply a sentimental meditation on the birth of a baby; it is an expression of astonishment at the transformation of the whole creation. This is the triumph of love, as the writer of the Song of Songs envisages: 'For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come' (2: 11-12). The open arms of the Christ child indicate an invitation back to paradise for the human race of which Mary is the representative: 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away' is how the Song of Songs puts its prophecy of this moment.

Music is the dimension that is as yet silent in this painting and perhaps Piero is inviting us to supply it. We see the angels playing their lutes to accompany the song of the new creation. Mary has already established herself as one who is in tune with heaven when she sings her Magnificat (the Church has always received this carefully constructed piece of Hebrew midrash as a song).

And we see the angels stand on ground that sweeps from left to right, their terrain and its music seeming to sweep round and envelop the shepherds whom they have summoned to witness this mystery – heaven wedded to earth, with music as the environment of their union. This is no new invention.

In the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, the dons of Israel's university life, set in the generous courts of the Temple, reflected on how creation might be imagined. Drawing their inspiration from the rhythm of worship, they perceive that music is the response to this outpouring of God's creativity. So in the book of Job they speak of the morning stars singing together when God lays the foundations of the earth, a scene re-rehearsed when music again pours forth to greet the birth of the Christ child and the day dawns when creation is restored and paradise regained.

And the question this painting leaves us with is this: Will you supply the music that is the environment in which the new creation, the civilisation of love, becomes visible and actual on earth? The 20th century Russian dissident, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, wrote an essay in which he comments on words from an earlier Russian dissident, Dostoyevsky, who wrote: "Beauty will save the earth".

Solzhenitsyn opined that indeed, beauty has the capacity to release us from the many nooses that enslave and demean humanity. His experiences of brutality must also have made him realise that no beauty devised by the canons of our own cosmetic expectations can adequately establish the environment of justice, truth and goodness. This can only be accomplished by the beauty that is the reflection of God, the artificer of all creation in which the capacity of divine glory can be found – morally and materially.

If this is so, Piero has not simply given us an attractive painting that is now old and valuable, he has bequeathed us a challenge: will you live your life in joyful harmony with the song of justice and hope that this icon of beauty silently portrays?