

Actual, factual historical accuracy can be frustratingly elusive in Scripture. Add to this generations of interpretation and retelling of Scripture's stories and we can often find we've even drifted away from the story as it's actually told in our Gospel texts. We don't know, for example, that there were *three* wise men, or that the wise men were kings. The shepherds from the Gospel of Luke's telling of Jesus' birth seem to be entirely unknown to the writer of Matthew's Gospel, and the guiding star irrelevant to the writer of Luke.

To a contemporary mind these details, these discrepancies, can be a stumbling block, a very real obstacle to finding faith. A contemporary mind might constantly trip up on the question of "what actually happened?" – genuinely concerned about whether certain details of our stories in Scripture have just been 'made up?' And if they have been, what then? How can we believe in something that didn't actually happen?

These are, absolutely, valid wonderings, and they're also the thinking habits of minds shaped to approach the world in a particular way. It's a very particular way and it's a way shaped by culture, a culture that believes the only way to truth is through objective, provable fact.

Well, it is a point of fact that my family and I moved here from Seattle over the summer. This is a fact that's well known by the folks we've met since we got here. At a recent high school basketball game, "Seattle" got yelled a lot. Turns out that Will, our high school freshman, is known as Seattle because of this "fact." While I assume this is an affectionate nickname, and I do hear it as an affectionate nickname, "Seattle" also carries with it the reminder that Will's a kid who's just moved here, he's a new kid, he's the one who grew up somewhere else.

Focusing on a single fact can be a way of othering or distancing (for good or ill), it tells something of a story about someone that's only part of their truth. "Seattle" is a name rooted in a fact, and it risks becoming something of a sticky story, keeping Will as something a little bit 'other.'

Ours is a culture that loves facts about stuff - sadly though we're often trained to pay attention to some facts over others. By the time we're adults, in this culture, we're all highly skilled at stacking up the facts about someone's gender, their race, ethnicity, body size, physical ability, physical characteristics, sexual orientation, level of education, class, wealth. We live in a society that tells us these are the facts, the facts we need to know, because when they're collected together, they tell us a story about life as a society that is true.

This story about life as a society is all about power and authority, value and worth. It's a story about about who *should* hold power, who *is* above or below, who we *should* hold in high esteem, and based on the facts of who we are: how we each fit into this story, what we should expect from life, what, essentially, we deserve. It's a story of hierarchy, with some in the top spot, and most falling into place somewhere beneath .

A fact may be true, but this doesn't mean that stories drawing from an arbitrary collection of facts are also true. Stories are still stories; and stories can be very dangerous if they claim truth by pointing to the facts they contain, and they can be dangerous when they're told and retold so often, that many of us have little to no trouble believing in them whole-heartedly, having complete faith in their 'truth.'

Just because a story may contain actual, verifiable facts, doesn't make *the story* true. A story is still a story. What's critical, really, is reflecting on why the story is being told.

The stories in Scripture call on us to do just that, to interpret them, to mine them for meaning.

In today's Gospel reading we're called to make meaning out of the *contrast* between King Herod – a king appointed by the Roman Empire, a man who holds and wields a great deal of worldly power, and an infant, the newborn baby Jesus, a born king, a cosmic king, the one Herod fears is the long-awaited true king. We're invited to notice that despite their collective status and wealth and power, King Herod and the Jerusalem establishment are quaking in their boots ... we're called to notice that so-called wise men from the East, folks derided by the culture of the day for their misguided fascination with astrology, these folks, are filled with joy, and are the only ones who seem to notice and know what's playing out in Bethlehem. And so we're called to reconsider our established ideas of who has wisdom, our conventional notions of who holds true power? We're called to reconsider what we understand to be true.

The story of the Incarnation, the story of the birth of a baby that would disrupt our very relationship to the fabric of time and space, the birth of a baby that would usher in a new age, this is a story that holds the power to disrupt the stories we've been told and believe, stories that limit life and perpetuate injustice.

The story of the Incarnation has the power to change the way we understand God, and so call us back into union with the Source of all life and with one another. It's the beginning of an even greater story that can help us understand, know, that God dwells in and through human bodies ... that we each are fully and truly valued and worthy, and infused with Divine power that longs for expression in each of our lives; and by extracting this meaning, through our interpretation of this story, we can come to understand how we might be made whole, healed by the force of the love that flows through the universe.

Facts are part of all our stories, for sure. It may be a fact that Will is from Seattle. It may be a fact that I am a woman, or that I am from England, or that I am a priest ... but, the way we use facts, the assumptions we draw from them, the stories we spin from them, these are not always true, all our stories are not necessarily fact.

Any stories about essential difference between us, stories about difference in inherent value or worth, any stories that use facts to give us a false basis for inclusion or exclusion, for belonging or setting apart, for the hoarding and unjust wielding of power and wealth, these stories need to be interrogated ... and then, I believe, smashed to bits for being the dangerous junk that they are.

The over-arching story of our culture is a tragically enduring one, it's a tall tale of a natural hierarchy, and essential difference, and it's still being used as a kind of mythology to explain away so much of the world's injustice. But our Christian story serves an entirely different purpose. It points to a fundamentally liberating and empowering truth, accessible to us all, the truth of our life in God, and this truth is life-giving for all, healing and nourishing .. for all. This truth is very Good News indeed, and it's our ultimate fact.