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Let your light shine...

By Jim Taylor

A small ceramic Christmas tree sits on a table in our front hall. It's not much of a tree – about 12 inches high, dark green, with whitish snow flaked on the ends of its branches. A light bulb inside shines out through coloured plastic plugs stuck into holes in the branches.

Over the years, we've lost about a dozen of the plastic plugs. The light inside now shines directly out through several holes.

It never was particularly pretty, I suppose. But it's special for me. Because it was given to me with love.

It came from Lorraine Wicklow over 30 years ago. The next summer, Lorraine died of a massive brain hemorrhage.

As far as I know, she had no family, no relatives. Perhaps I was her family. She used to drop in at my office, back in the days when I worked at the United Church's national offices in Toronto. She always arrived at the very end of the day, just as I was loading up my briefcase to go home.

Internally, I sighed. I knew this would be a long evening.

"Just a minute, Lorraine," I would say. Then I'd call Joan to say, "Lorraine just dropped in."

Joan understood, and took supper out of the oven.

"I mustn't keep you," Lorraine always said. But she did, anyway.

Different perspectives

Lorraine's theology couldn't have been farther from mine. She attended a fundamentalist church. She had visions. She told me about heaven. About streets paved with gold, and gates made of jewels. About the people she met

there, and their message for me.

She was, I suppose, a revelation to me. When I described her visions to Gordon Nodwell, the minister at the United Church down the street from my office, he said, “That’s straight out of Revelation.”

So I read Revelation. Thanks to Lorraine, I became acquainted with several parts of the Bible that I had avoided before.

She’d relate another of her visions. “Do you believe that?” she would ask, leaning forward earnestly.

“Not really,” I would reply. And I would try to explain, as well as I could, my understandings of modern biblical scholarship. Of the historical and cultural assumptions that shaped the biblical text. Of the conflicts between the biblical story and our growing knowledge of science, psychology, sociology...

She countered with a text, invariably from the King James Version. For her, the Word of God – the capitals are deliberate – trumped any other understanding.

We lived in different worlds. We listened to each other. But we talked past each other.

Still, whether I understood her or not, I know she lived her faith, 100 per cent. She forgave me for my heresies, because that’s what Jesus would have done.

And, sometimes, after I had stumbled through an explanation of why I believed what I did, she would say, “You know, when you talk to me that way, you almost shine.”

Lorraine has been dead for many years now. But her little ceramic tree still shines in the darkness of our front hall.

As long as I have that tree, she too still shines in my memories.

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YOUR TURN

In last week’s column, I wandered around the difficulties of taking the biblical descriptions of Jesus’ birth as literal fact. I mentioned the fact that writers of that time had no zero to work with.

The concept of zero fascinates Ginny Adams: “One of my favorite books growing up was Mathematics for the Millions. The author opened my eyes to the wonder of the discovery of zero. Having a zero meant then that math could be used to solve problems, that there was a way to distinguish 30 from 300 from 3003.

“But zero is also a spiritual concept, one to remember in Advent. We say that Mary ‘humbled herself,’ she let go of her ego-self so she could be the zero in the equation, and that allowed God to put Her position markers into human life. And life has forever been changed, Emmanuel is still with us, and there will be a day when He will put the final zero into the equation.”

Laurina Tallman’s father was also somewhat fanatical about the wonders of mathematics: “My father, devout Christian that he was and bipolar, obsessive, and manic person that he was, spent at least two or three years of his retirement working out in mathematical, archaeological, Biblical, calendrical, and astronomical detail the precise identity of the Bethlehem star. I have the manuscripts and most of the research... Does anyone really care? If so, and you run into him and her, have them write me <rtallman@xplornet.ca>. I am not sure he came any closer than you have to a plausible explanation of that wonder in the sky.

“I used to say that his writing kept Dad away from worse mischief. Having had a hand in developing nuclear energy was enough trouble for a million lifetimes! Yet, Dad recognized the Holy Infant in the manger and produced the mind-aerobics of his search for His star as an act of worship. We bring what gifts we have to that crèche.”

Isabel Gibson picked up on my closing comments, that the person mattered more than the legendary phenomena: “I understand that the story of a miraculous birth came late in the development of our Gospels. If the first disciples even knew of such stories, they didn’t care enough to record them. What they did bother to record was their experience of Jesus.”

Pat Jones forwarded the mailing to her children with the comment, “I enjoyed not only the column but also the up-dating of the *Magnificat* at the end. The *Magnificat* is Mary’s thoughts on her pregnancy.”

Finally – and not connected to any specific column – Bob Warrick sent his

Christmas greetings from Australia (where it is technically summer) to this cyber-community: “Christmas greetings from down here to you... We had a heavy hail storm on Saturday night which meant that Carols in the Park was cancelled. The hail was not big, but the ground was completely white -- and there was heavy rain as well...”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I've never been poor and homeless at Christmas. The ostentatious flaunting of wealth and family must be very painful for those who have neither. So here's a paraphrase of Psalm 80 for this coming Sunday.

1 Can't you hear us knocking on your door?
You stand inside, laughing in the firelight with your family;
You toy with your tinsel and your ornaments.
Can't you hear us?
2 We are the lost and the lonely, out in the cold.
3 We long for something to celebrate too.
4 How long can you ignore us?
How long can you close your eyes and ears to our situation?
5 Hunger gnaws on our bones;
we sip the salt of our tears.
6 We are an embarrassment. People turn away from us.
People laugh and joke; they don't even see us.
We are invisible.
7 Let us live too.
17 We have nothing with which to thank you.
But God will reward you in ways you cannot imagine.
Through us, God will heal your blindness;
You will touch a world you have never imagined.
18 You will not want to go back to your old ways.
Respond to our pleas, and see for yourself.
19 Let us live too. Please, let us live.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;

- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
