

Beyond Cute

C Christmas Eve--Luke 2:1-20

I googled the word "cute" the other day, and came across some really interesting information about Mickey Mouse. (Yes, the internet is my oyster.) In an article written on the occasion of Mickey's 50th birthday, biologist Stephen Jay Gould tracks the changes that Mickey has undergone since his debut on screen in the late twenties.¹ In those early days, Mickey had a mischievous and even mean streak which he has gradually lost in the intervening decades as he has matured into a national symbol. Concurrent with that process, his eyes have grown bigger, his forehead higher, and his snout more rounded and pudgy. It turns out that these are exactly the kind of physical features found in baby humans, and taken together they make up the quality we call cuteness which evokes nurturing responses in adults. Gould half-jokingly "measures" and "charts" these changes in Mickey's features over time, but you can see it just by looking at the drawings. Early on, Mickey looks more like a rat. Later, he looks more like a toddler. So as he has moved further away from his origins and deeper into his prominence as a symbol of the Disney brand, Mickey has changed in two important ways. He has become both better behaved and more cute.

Well it seems to me that this is a really powerful metaphor for what has happened to the Christmas story as well. It, too, has become both better behaved and more cute since its first writing. Over time we have lost the edgy social significance of its details. We have come to populate Jesus' birth, instead, with the sweet smell of hay, the warm breath of donkeys and cows, a kindly innkeeper who does what he can, gentle visiting

shepherds, and at the center of it all this clean, golden infant radiating innocence and, well, cuteness. Now there's nothing wrong with cuteness. As Gould points out, it has been a highly adaptive quality for our species. Part of the point of this season is that God took on the vulnerability and dependence that cuteness expresses. But something really important has been lost if cute is all we do with the birth of Jesus.

To begin with, we need to remember that Jesus is born into a time and place that is anything but cute. By the first century AD, the land of Israel, the land given by God to the Jewish people, has been ruled by a complicated combination of cruel foreign overlords and corrupt local priest-kings for centuries. Various factions of the people have assimilated into the culture of their invaders, and the Temple has become a puppet instrument for these interests. Taxation rates are appalling, people live in grinding poverty while petty officials enrich themselves, and popular uprisings are put down with merciless violence. Many Jews are looking for God to send a new leader, a Messiah, who like the kings of old will muster a military force to overthrow Rome and restore Israel to self-rule.

But in response to this deep yearning for a new leader, Luke's gospel directs us to a birth not in some powerful priest's home or even in some revolutionary's cave outside of Jerusalem but in some unwed mother's borrowed stall in a stable in the Judean hinterlands. Really, there's very little that's cute about this. Jesus is born into circumstances that are better described as desperate or even hopeless. For reasons that remain suspect, the innkeeper has barred this poor teenage girl from his house, forcing her to sweat and scream her way through the birth of her first child on dirty straw in a barn. She has nowhere to put the baby, so she tries to cobble together some kind of crib

out of the trough where the animals eat. And speaking of animals, the place smells like...well, lets just say it carries what my mother would call a "rich, organic odor." The air is cold. The hay is prickly and uncomfortable. And every couple of hours the innkeeper drops by to find out how soon Mary and Joseph will be leaving.

Then, as if the birth weren't inauspicious enough, God's angel announces it not to political rulers or priests or rabbis, but to a bunch of shepherds. Now these are not your crèche scene's friendly guys with hooked staves and fluffy sheep. Think of the way our society views homeless people, or people fresh out of prison, or maybe illegal immigrants and you get a better sense of what shepherds meant in the culture of first century Palestine. Rough and smelly, these guys arrive on the scene claiming that an angel told them Jesus was the new Messiah. And that's pretty much it. Word doesn't spread from there, because who's going to listen to a bunch of homeless criminals or some teenage peasant mother?

And the rest of the story is not much more promising. Later, this obscure child grows up to lead a pacifist movement for social change in a deeply violent world. His only weapon is the truth and his only shield is the loyalty he inspires among other downtrodden people. He manages to evade authorities for a couple years, but eventually he is caught and snuffed out like thousands of other criminals, at an age when many of us in this culture are finally just figuring out how to be adults.

In other words, from an objective viewpoint everything argues for the obscurity and irrelevance of this man. Luke almost seems to go out of his way to populate Jesus' birth and life with the most socially insignificant, marginalized witnesses. And yet out of that context of desperation and powerlessness rises one to whom our gospel dares to

apply the title which the Emperor of Rome, the most powerful political figure in the first-century world, reserved only for himself: Son of God. Out of that poverty and obscurity comes this miraculous child whose life and message are so powerful that even the cross cannot end them. Out of that disempowered corner of society emerges a man so full of divinity that his spirit will outlast the rise and fall of many Caesars, and even the rise and fall of many Empires within which those Caesars live, so that today, two millenia later, we may remember and study Augustus the Emperor, but we worship and follow Jesus the Christ.

So is the story of Jesus' birth cute? Sure it's cute. But if cute were all it were, we would have forgotten it long ago. The miracle is bigger than that. The miracle is God's willingness to enter our world in its most desperate corners, through its least powerful people, at its darkest hour. The miracle is God's ability to surprise us. Just when the answers we seek are hardening into images of violent retribution and political overthrow, just when the world-order seems to be coalescing into permanent winners and losers, the new Messiah appears by stealth and commands our transformation from the inside out. Love God, he tells us. Love your neighbors. Love your enemies, even. And on this eve of the two-thousand-eighth anniversary of his birth we say to him, once again, we will.

ⁱ Stephen Jay Gould. "A Biological Homage to Mickey Mouse," in *The Panda's Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1980. Accessed online on 12/22/2009 at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuteness>.