

Last week we went to my 4 year old grandson's Christmas concert. Mind you, there was no manger, no shepherds, and no wise men. How easily we have surrendered our heritage and our culture. From the time my own son won the coveted role of sheep at the age of 4, I have always found a disconcerting sub plot in the Christmas story.

The wise men turn up at Herod's palace - the logical place to look for a king - and ask, "*Where is he that is born king of the Jews?*" (Mat 2:2). The chief priests and the scribes, the religious leaders of the day, come forward with the answer. "*That's easy! "In Bethlehem of Judea, Micah 5:2."*

Now this is the long awaited Messiah we are looking for. "*The desire of all nations*" (Hag 2:6). And it is to be expected that those responsible for the spiritual welfare of the people will know all about Messiah. And they do. But there is no record of them leading the charge to Bethlehem. The shepherds - those on the lower rung of Jewish society - were there. The angels providing the choral backdrop to the unfolding drama were there. The wise men arrived a bit later. But no scribes, no priests, no Pharisees. The religious heavy weights are out to lunch while God is breaking into human history.

And it became part of my Christmas ritual to wonder about the clergy at the manger scene. *What if we should fail to discern the hand of God in the world today?* And even more disconcertingly, *what if we should in our ignorance, actually oppose the program of God?* It's happened before.

In fact, down through history it's been the norm rather than the exception. Jesus lamented that the Jews had habitually missed the point. They "*killed and stoned the prophets*" (Mat 23:27). The religious leaders were certainly on the wrong side of history at the trial(s) and crucifixion of Jesus.

As Europe was about to emerge from the Dark Ages, God put His hand upon an Oxford master whom history now recognises as the *Father of the English Reformation*. John Wycliffe was born in the early 1300s. He gave England its first Bible in the vernacular and wrote papers questioning the centralised structure of the church. He even had the temerity to assert that "*It is lawful for any man to preach the Word of God without authority or licence from the Apostolic See*" (the church establishment). He so incensed the authorities that some 50 years after he had died of a stroke, they dug up his remains and burned them to ensure that he would have no resurrection body.

As fate, or history – or God - would have it, the English king of the day married a Bohemian princess and the consequent exchange between the two countries, took the writings of Wycliffe across to Europe.

As rector of the Prague University, Jan Huss embraced, expanded and promoted the teachings of Wycliffe. He asserted that Christ was the only Head of the Church and the

scriptures the only authority for teaching and faith. Once again, the leaders of the day failed to discern the hand of God at work here, and they had Jan Huss burned at the stake.

A hundred years later the Augustinian Friar Martin Luther discovered the writings of Huss and was appalled to discover that the Bohemian had been martyred for holding views similar to those he himself was formulating. In October 1517, Luther nailed his 95 *Theses* to the door of the Wittenberg church, but the religious leaders of his time missed what God was doing with *Justification by Faith*, and in 1521 Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X.

And God wasn't yet done with Jan Huss. His followers formed the *Moravian Church*, the first protestant denomination. About a hundred years after Luther's excommunication, John Wesley, an ordained Anglican minister was called to serve in the new colonies. As he crossed the Atlantic, he was deeply affected by the faith of a group of Moravian missionaries, also heading out to the Americas. Wesley returned to England greatly disillusioned, still seeking what the Moravians had called *saving faith*. Five years after meeting the Moravians, Wesley found that faith among a small group studying an outline of the Epistle to the Romans, written by, of all people, Martin Luther. Wesley adopted the slogan, *The world is my parish* and it has been estimated that during his ministry he travelled over 4,000 miles annually, preaching some 40,000 sermons during his lifetime.

He nevertheless lived and died an Anglican, but once again the hierarchy missed the real action and insisted that his *lay preachers* be registered as *non Anglican*.

You may think *What a dreadful 400 years in the life of the Church*. No! that has been a consistent pattern for most of church history. But look more closely at the intricate pattern that is woven around these men of God, and see the interlinking and flow of truth between the continents, laying the foundations for vast church building programs. Surely in retrospect we must recognize the signature of God across these pages of human history, a history that revolves around a barn in an obscure Middle Eastern town; shepherds who had nothing to bring but the ripe atmosphere of their sheepfolds; eastern potentates with their finery and precious gifts. Only God could put together such a setting for His own arrival in the affairs of men.

The economy of God has always marched to a different drummer whose beat is often discerned only by individuals upon whom God has placed His hand.

Religious leaders need to maintain and advance their positions in the hierarchies that inevitably form within human institutions; and to a greater or lesser extent their focus must be diverted and fragmented. In Jesus' day, Rome found it easiest to outsource the day to day management of the people it conquered, to the local leaders – and the priests did quite nicely out of this arrangement. In his book *The Message and the Kingdom*, Richard Horsley describes archaeological excavations of their Jerusalem residences that give testimony to a lifestyle of elegance.

Of course the clergy of the day were blindsided by the Bethlehem manger scene. Of course the likes of Wycliffe and Huss asserting that Christ recognises no hierarchy between Himself and His believers, were not immediately embraced by the “church” of their day. But God has never had to resort to plan B. His plan A just keeps on unfolding. He raises up people as, when and where, he needs them. It sometimes seems that He and we are operating in parallel universes where we pursue our agendas and He achieves the outcomes He has been working towards since “*Before the foundations of the world*” (Eph 1:4).

In that O so familiar Christmas story, and its sequel – the Easter story – we see what have so far been the pinnacles in God’s redemptive program, pursuing a program sometimes through, and sometimes in spite of, humanity – but often unpredictably, and always effectively. We would never have done it that way and usually see it for what it really is only with the benefit of hindsight. *God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.*

So no! There were neither priests, scribes nor Pharisees in the manger scene - although many came on board once they saw what was going on. God works through individuals and seems to have little regard for the edifices of human institutions and their hierarchies,

*“I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me”* (Ezek 22:30).