

I must tell you a wonderful ancient story you've (probably) never heard before! It was first sung about the time Jesus was born--the first Christmas--& it has in it elements of the Christmas story (incarnation, gift-trees, a loving couple, hospitality, God's presence unawares, interior riches undimmed by outer poverty, a lowly place in the midst of many high-roofed homes [from all of which the divine visitors were turned away], a priest & priestess in a temple, destruction, new birth).

Implicit in both stories, & the specific moral of the second (in its last two lines) is that "The good...are God's peculiar care, / And such as honor Heaven, shall heavenly honor share" (Dryden's tr. of Ovid [d.AD/CE18], "Baucis & Philemon" in THE METAMORPHOSES)....Here's the old-old unfamiliar "Christmas" story (my words except Ovid's ""s). For narrative continuity, I've added a few tie-ins.

Once upon a time "an old experienced man," Lelex by name, was asked to tell the story of the two trees, "a hard oak, a softer linden," on either side of a temple entrance. With these opening words, he provided his story with a cosmic context:

"Heaven's power is infinite: earth, air, and sea / The manufactur'd mass, the making power obey" (my underlining; as in the Bible, the bottom line of order is that creation is, though not simply, obedient to the Creator).

Or rather there had been a temple. Now "the two neighboring trees" "Stand on a moderate rise, with wonder shown" (my underlining; wonder, only wonder, opens to soul to hear soul-stories).

Long ago Jove (Jupiter, Zeus, chief of the Olympian deities) & Hermes (his messenger) incarnated themselves, "conceal'd their deities" in flesh, descended and "knocked at a thousand ["lock'd"] doors" of high-roof (rich) homes: "Not one of all the thousand" doors opened to welcome the strangers.

Then the two men-gods (without their identifying symbols, Jove's lightning bolt & Hermes' rod) "At last found a hospitable house / A homely shed; the roof, not far from the ground," where an old "long married happy pair," "Now old in love," welcomed them, "though little was their store, / Inured to want, their poverty they bore, / Nor aim'd at wealth," & treated all visitors ("master or servant") "alike."

Now comes (lines 29 & 30) what I took this Thinksheet's title from:

"Command was none, where equal love was paid,  
Or rather both commanded, both obey'd."

Observations:

1 Notice: The story obliterates **classism** by preaching divine approval of the town's only couple who treat all "alike." A radical social ethic, anticipating the Gospels.

2 The story obliterates **sexism**, the husband being commanded as well as commanding--which requires, reciprocally, that each be submissive. In the NT, we are to submit ourselves to God under his commands (Jas.4.7), & secondarily in marriage to each other (Eph.5.21; of greater weight than wifely submission [Eph.5.22, Col.3.18]); tertiarily submission to "your leaders" (Heb.13.17)....What Ovid has, & the NT does not, is the command-note, though of course it's passively implicit in submission. No place in Ovid's marriage-ideal for "Don't tell **me** what to do!" Active commands are to be received by what I may call active submission. The NT may be more realistic. But my point: Early Christianity, in creating its ethic, baptized such Jewish & pagan differentia (behaviors) as did not contradict, but rather reinforced, the Christian faith & social vision (as, I've pointed out extensively elsewhere, in THE SENTENCES OF SEXTUS).

3 Notice! Sexual equality here is not (as in feminist liberationism) a **power** issue but a **love** issue. Philemon (here a poor man; in the NT, a rich man) loves his wife Baucis as much as she loves him. (A NT ironic note: Compete in love!)

4 The Ovid tree-story hit me hard a few hours ago right after I'd located & printed for somebody a tree poem, Joyce Kilmer's "...only God can make a tree." And also because, having just arisen from a five-day sickbed over which oldwife Loree had hovered between her outtrips for Hospice & church work, I had been giving thanks for a blissful 52+-year-old marriage in which commands are almost never explicit & submissions almost never onerous (& usually joyful).

To continue old Lelex's story, which parallels Abraham's angel-visitors (Gn.18.1-15; abstracted in Heb.13.2 NRSV "without knowing it"):

The hosts' entertainment of the two incognito guests is the most detailed, the most vivid, I know of in ancient literature. You can see & smell & taste everything! Let's just take the fire. These mornings, I find just enough live coals to start three hardwood logs in the stove. Baucis has no underdraft in her fireplace, so she has to coax up the fire "with leaves and bark," then blow, then add brushwood & chips, &--when that's blazing away--"at last the boughs of rotten trees," then put on the kettle, which shone "like burnish'd gold" because she'd cleaned off the soot from the last usage. Who cares about all that detail? I do! I too am a firemaker! And the gods did: you can see--can't you?--their eyes taking in everything. She puts lukewarm water in a wood pail for the guests to wash their feet. Then "the good old housewife" levels the table with a piece of broken pottery, then rubs mintleaves all over the tabletop to provide a delicious aroma over her astonishingly elaborate cuisine, "a country banquet" served "with hearty welcome, and an open face.... / A willing mind, and a desire to please." When the "shining clean" bowls were put on the table, they repeatedly filled themselves as they danced around the tabletop! The old couple apologized that they had only "country fare," "And up they held their hands, and fell to pray'r."

So what's with all those inhospitable rich folks? They "justly perish for impiety." A flood takes them. But the little hut rises above the flood & becomes a temple in which B. & P. worship J. & H., whom they'd ask that neither B. nor P. would have to bear the grief of the other's death.

One day, as in front of the temple's entrance they were telling the story of the hut that became a temple, they gradually became those two trees with which our story began. "Farewell, O faithful spouse!" each said to the other just before their their mouths filled with bark....Where do the Christmas trees come in! Worshipers through the years attached "garlands" to that oak & that linden, "And tablets hung for gifts of granted vows." "With pious prayer," Lexus concludes with what I quoted in this Thinksheet's second paragraph....Merry Christmas!

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