

St Luke's, Sevenoaks on 22nd December 2019

Preacher: Laurence Pearce

Isaiah 7. 10-16 Matthew 1.18-25

"Do not be afraid"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

For many of us, much of the appeal of Advent and of the build-up to Christmas is its sheer repetitive predictability.

We look forward to hearing, again and again, about the angels and the asses, Bethlehem and the Baptist, carols, calendars and cards, dreams and donkeys, the Epiphany and the flight to Egypt, frankincense, fetes and flocks, gifts and Galilee, heralds and Herod, Isaiah, Immanuel, infants and innocents....

And yet.... the first Christians were not much interested in these stories and details surrounding Jesus' birth. Indeed, the earliest writings that survive, the letters of Paul and the gospel of Mark, have no details or stories about any of Jesus' conception or birth or childhood.

For instance, Paul simply tells his listeners that Jesus had a human birth - and leaves it at that. What did matter to Paul, however, was that Jesus was the long-awaited fulfilment of God's promises and Israel's hopes and, therefore, had to be, as prophesied, a direct descendant of David. This is why he refers, in today's second reading, to 'his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh'.

What did interest these earliest writers was, firstly, Jesus' teaching, secondly, the events of his life between his baptism by John and his resurrection, and, thirdly, the meaning of his resurrection.

Even so, when the Christmas stories did come to be written, only a few decades later, it was with the purpose of reinforcing beliefs that were already firmly and universally held.... that Jesus was uniquely special, that he was the expected Messiah, and that he is the Son of God.

And, although we may take for granted these beliefs about Jesus, we should remember that they actually seem fantastic to many people today. In any case, I suspect that these beliefs are not what underpin the promise of a well-known food retailer 'to be big on the Christmas you can believe in'. So.... we need to be clear on the central messages of these Christmas stories (with their dreams, angels and miracles) that:

God is a God of love and that, by his incarnation, he identifies himself with us and with our lives in this world.

But, to do so, we need to be aware that the much loved and familiar details and stories are not about giving us a feel-good warm feeling. Rather the details are essentially theological points, intended to hammer home certain messages.

Matthew's account of the virgin birth is a good example of this way of doing theology through the telling of story.

To start with, we need to remember that there is only one other occasion in the entire Bible when the normal requirement for a biological father is bypassed, and that is the comparably important account in Genesis of the creation.

The epic point being made is, therefore, that God alone has the power to create and recreate, and that this conception and this birth are the start of God's new creation. It is also that this child is the start of the remaking of human life in God's image, and, ultimately, that salvation does not depend on human, and male, initiative, but on God's.

A second example of theology through storytelling is Matthew's account of Joseph's role in the proceedings to illustrate God's use of very ordinary people.

Traditionally, Joseph has received, so to speak, a poor press. Sometimes, like any cuckold, he is a figure of amusement. At other times, he seems like a clumsy puppet responding to divine instruction in dreams. *[Indeed, in Matthew's account, he gets his marching orders in this way four times.]* As such, he is depicted as being swept along by events he does not understand and certainly does not control. And, of course, he was just a carpenter, who - in a society where between 3% and 10% of the population may have been literate - was probably not the case.

And yet, for Matthew, he is an example of proper obedience to God's word and will. He should be a model for those with an intellectual belief but who may lack a transformative faith. This is because he does not just hear God's word, but actually does it. His faith bears fruit because it leads to obedient action.

And, interestingly, Matthew's treatment of Joseph is mirrored in Luke's of Mary, who was, you might have thought, an even more unpromising candidate for divine selection.

They are both, however, a strong reminder that God needs and chooses ordinary people, you might say people like you and me, to respond to his initiatives and progress his purposes.

A third point of the Christmas narrative is the, by now, familiar one that God often uses apparently unworthy people.

This is never stated outright, but it is strongly hinted by the genealogy at the start of Matthew's chapter 1. This includes, amongst dozens of men, the names of five women, who each – to put it tactfully – are unlikely heralds of a virgin birth. These five are:

- Tamar who tempted and seduced her father-in-law
- Rahab who was a prostitute, albeit one with a patriotic heart of gold
- Ruth who was both a Gentile and David's grandmother

- Bathsheba who dropped her towel as she was getting out of the bath in front of a peeping King David
- And, finally, this mainly inglorious cast ends with 'Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.'

Effectively, Matthew is telling us that God turns upside down the views and values of the world, and that even women – indeed even women with a 'past' – are part of his plan.

This genealogy, in verses 1 to 17, is too boring ever to be read out in full on a Sunday, but it also telling us something else.

Its three sections cover the periods from Abraham to David's father, from David himself to the deportation to Babylon, and from the deportation to Joseph and Mary (that we've just heard).

In other words, and Matthew does not use actual words to say so, he is telling us that the birth of Jesus is the start of a new and glorious age, when God will at last fulfil all his promises of redemption to his people and inaugurate – if not yet complete - his kingdom on earth.

A fourth, perhaps familiar point made by the Christmas story is that, all too often, God does not give us what we want or think we need.

Many of us are familiar with getting Christmas presents we didn't know we wanted, such as more toiletries or more handkerchiefs. And, here I'm thinking of my mother's letter, aged six, to Santa, asking for a sewing machine and a rocking-horse, little knowing then that she would never learn to sew or ride a horse.

But our own little mishaps pale into insignificance besides the unwanted cards dealt to poor Joseph and Mary. How would you like to have to thank God for a visibly pregnant betrothed (like Joseph) or a baby of unknown origin (like Mary)?

It can't have been easy for either of them to accept that God knows best.

Perhaps it is hardly surprising that the angels had to make so many overtime visitations to the unhappy couple to ensure that this inauspicious marriage did actually take place. And perhaps the most interesting and most subversive theological point is made by Matthew's use of the word 'righteous' or 'just.'

In most bible translations, Joseph is described as a righteous man, a very rare accolade – for example, in the Old Testament, it is said of Noah and of nobody else. Generally speaking, it is said of God alone, and applied only sparingly to people, if they are very careful to keep the Law. And the law at that time clearly required the termination of an engagement in the case of 'adultery.'

In Old Testament times, the penalty for this was stoning, but, by Joseph's time, Roman rule had abolished Jewish death penalties. However, as a law-abiding man, Joseph would at least have been expected to repudiate his errant fiancée publicly in a trial for adultery.

The fact that Joseph is dissuaded from the 'proper' course of action by angelic arm-twisting can be seen as an example of God's call to his people to abandon worldly conventional wisdom about who is good and who is worthy. Here we have yet another confirmation of the fact that God uses deeply flawed people. And, lest we forget, even the three giants of the Old Testament, Abraham, Moses and David, were all familiar with dishonest trickery (A) or murder (M) or adultery (D) even though they also found great favour with God.

In this reading, then, Matthew makes a number of wide-ranging points, which, however, can perhaps be summarized in the angel's advice to Joseph, and in Luke's gospel to Mary, to 'fear not' or 'do not be afraid'.

This phrase is used, quite literally, dozens of times in the Bible. Here it is usually a reminder either that God will take direct action to help his people, such as helping the Israelites defeat Og the king of Bashan, or that He will provide whatever is needed, such as the manna in the desert or the food given to the widow of Zarephath who saved Elijah.

Today's reading reminds that we need to put our trust in God, knowing that if we respond – as Joseph and Mary did - to His promptings, then God's new age can begin, and we can bring the kingdom and God's love into our world and our lives.