

Fourth Sunday in Advent 2010

19 December 2010

Anglican Church of the Ascension, Hilton

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Readings:

Isaiah 7: 10 – 16

Psalm 24

Romans 1: 1 – 7

Matthew 1: 18 – 25

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*Direct Biblical quotations are taken from The New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989. Parts of the sermon are quoted from commentators (online materials plus own sermon records) from Andrew Prior and Bill Loader.*

**Matthew 1: 18 – 25**

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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Introduction:

Last week's readings and sermon focused significantly on the promised Messiah foretold by the prophets, and on the theme of Hope.

This week, being the Sunday before Christmas, the readings move us even closer to the event we are about to celebrate, using words from Isaiah the Prophet centuries before Jesus was born that seem to point to his birth – and also reading from the start of St Paul's writings to the Christians in Rome, years after the death and resurrection of this same Jesus, highlighting Paul's and others' belief that Jesus was indeed the one who fulfilled all the prophets' expectations. Even the Psalm read today has a sense of celebration and rising up to welcome The King of Glory who is arriving / has arrived!

But it is to the Gospel that I want to turn our attention, and I've entitled this sermon:

NO ORDINARY BIRTH NOTICE!

"Now the birth of Jesus took place..."

These words are so familiar we may find it hard to hear anything new.

There was nothing strange about the story within its own setting. The gospel would be exceptional if it did *not* have such stories, given its other claims about Jesus.

Matthew would have had no problem with the "mechanics" of the conception. These may be issues for us now – the notion of divine conception – and there are some who struggle to accept it. It also has a sense of God "forcing himself upon Mary".

As one writer, Andrew Prior, put it:

"... to think, on the basis of our better biology and more enlightened gender awareness, that the story says nothing, and has no authority, is naive. It is to respond too quickly to our unfamiliarity with another age and culture. The power of story lies in its ability to provoke a response and make us consider and reconsider our existence, and what it means.

"In a risqué cartoon (for the 1960s), Woman's Weekly magazine had a pregnant young woman asking her doctor why he was gazing out the surgery window. "Last time this happened," he said, "there was a star in the east."

"The (comments) about what "found to be with child by the Holy Spirit" might mean, tell us how relevant this story remains to our lives, including the sense of the Divine forcing itself upon Mary.

“Does this ‘seizure’ not happen to us all? Did we ask to be alive? Did we ask for a life in the constant presence and growing awareness of our death? What is this God which places us here in this arbitrary and precarious misery, where most people stutter through life while a few privileged ones lord it over the rest?”

A cartoonist had a picture of a fellow watching leaves in a stream. The text said something like:

Row, row, row your boat
Merrily down the gutter,
Muddily, muddily, muddily, muddily
Life is but a mutter.

Will our life be a mutter, or will we, like Mary, grasp what we have had thrust upon us, and live seeking more? How will we choose to see our life – as mud in the gutter, or as a part in the Divine drama of the universe?

One of the slanders against the early Christians was that Jesus was the product of rape by a Roman soldier. There is no historical basis for this claim, just as with the claims that that Joseph was the biological father of Jesus, or that Jesus was the product of some other more or less willing liaison; the gospels are not primarily interested with biographical details in the way we are tempted to read them.

To keep our perspective, we must not ignore the first 17 boring “begetting” verses of Matthew. Those verses tell us of the Genesis (a word meaning origins, birth) of Jesus the Messiah. He is heir and successor to Abraham and David and Solomon. Yet at the same time, he is also very much one of us.

There are (at least) three Gentile women named in his lineage, and three who have had improper sexual relationships. His family is legendary in Israel, and at the same time it is ordinary and flawed. Suddenly it seems women have significance, for it was highly unusual to have women listed in a line of succession. Also, Joseph was legally required to divorce Mary. This would have been regarded as an act of justice. However, God steps in dramatically, and already, before he is born, Jesus gives rise to reshaping and reinterpreting God’s Law of justice and compassion.

So the birth of Jesus is not human alone, but has the hand of God involved at every moment. This also recalls the biblical stories of God causing miraculous pregnancy in women who had been unable to have children.

Gentle Joseph, already unusual in his determination for a 'quiet' divorce, allows God to proceed. He is the first in a long line of people in the gospel who can see a new movement of God in the events of Jesus' life. Joseph's standing aside is remarkable. The justice of the day demanded divorce (with return of the dowry?), and even stoning, but he stands aside because the child's name is Yeshua – "God saves". He is the fulfillment of "what has been spoken by the Lord through the prophet..."

Jesus is the fulfillment who will save, who is God with us, and who is anointed by God; using the related Hebrew names: *Jesus (Yeshua), Emmanuel, Messiah (Moshiach)*.

The Divine Birth Notice, as given in the first Chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, seems wordy by comparison with modern newspaper birth notices. But as a commentator, Bill Loader, notes:

"The birth narratives are not really about the baby Jesus; they are about the Jesus whom we see in ministry and crucified under the banner 'King of the Jews'.

"The Christmas stories always need connecting with the grown up Jesus if they are not to be sentimentalised. Don't put tinsel around the cross at Christmas. The magic of angels and the virginal conception [... enable us to celebrate that life of compassion and self-giving.] In their own way they give us the radical message of inclusiveness: of the women, of the Gentiles, of the sexually suspect, of the pregnant girl. They lay before us the violence which grace confronts: the all-maleness [to the exclusion of women], the righteous Law observance, the willingness to abandon the pregnant girl, the murderous ruler, the slaughtered children, and the aspiration to kill 'the king of the Jews'.

"We have to work hard to keep it all from being reduced to jingles to promote shopping sprees or being perpetuated as just a bit more Christian naiveté...."

So in one important respect, the birth narrative of Jesus, provided by Matthew, IS like birth notices in the newspaper: Not so much about the baby, but about hopes and aspirations for a life and its significance for the whole family. "They are about the Jesus whom we see in ministry and crucified under the banner 'King of the Jews.'" So the reading this week is not really a birth notice, but an introductory chapter to a gospel.

And the gospel is no newspaper obituary: *This was the life of Jesus*. An obituary is for a life that is finished.

The reading this week is the introductory chapter of a manifesto for the ongoing life of the Kingdom of Heaven.