



Revd Ro's Reflection on 4th Sunday of Advent

Year A

Romans 1.1-7

Matthew 1.18-25

This week is Advent four and often on an Advent crown the candle is pink to represent Mary, the mother of Jesus. The readings for this week are about Mary; often it is the annunciation from Luke, including the great song of Mary - the Magnificat, which I looked at last week. This year it is from Matthew.

The beginnings of all four gospels are different. St. John's gospel begins with the account of the incarnation, for me one of the most beautiful and powerful passages in the scriptures. How he captures all the wonder of God and the incarnation in a few lines is incredible.

¹ 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

There is no doubt about it, John sets it out clearly, Jesus the Christ is God the creator, part of the trinity. He came to earth for us human and divine.

Mark's, probably the earliest gospel, begins with John the Baptist's mission in the wilderness. John is slightly older than Jesus and is preparing the way of the Lord, his Messiah. Jesus is baptised by John before his time of testing in the wilderness.

It is in the gospel of Matthew and Luke that we learn of Jesus' birth. Again they are different. In Matthew the story is told from Joseph's point of view, in Luke it is from Mary's.

I remember going to see the play 'Nativity' at the Rep in Birmingham many years ago now. I found it hugely powerful. One scene depicts the reading we have today, the visit of the angel Gabriel to Joseph in a dream.

But let's go back a bit. Matthew's gospel does not begin with a story as in Luke. No he begins with the genealogy of Jesus. Genealogy is vitally important, think of our own royal family who are on the throne because they can trace their ancestry back; and on forward flows the line of succession,

father to son and now daughter! Of course when things go wrong and someone usurps the throne then that person is determined to justify their claim via their ancestry, sometimes at all cost. Henry VIII the son of Henry VII who had taken the throne from Richard the III of the Plantagenet line went about destroying any Plantagenets who happened to be left! All our landed gentry follow the line of succession, it is stated in law.

For a Jew ancestry was of paramount importance, Matthew is coming to this from a Jewish perspective. He gives the genealogy of Jesus in three paragraphs. Firstly he is descended from the founding father of the race, Abraham. God made a covenant with Abraham, he promised he would be the father of a great nation. The other name that jumps out is the Royal King David. The long awaited Messiah would be of David's line. At that time the recent kings of Israel didn't have a drop of David's blood and they knew it.

Jesus however is not just king of Israel he is King of the world and as Messiah he will set his people free.

¹⁷ 'So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations'

These sets of three are important and Jesus is beginning the new era, the next generation. This child is extraordinary and he will do extraordinary things. That is what Matthew is stating clearly here, just as clearly as when St. John states Christ is co-creator, part of the Godhead.

So now we begin the account of the birth, it is not from Mary's perspective. No angel has appeared and told her she will conceive a child of the Holy Spirit. This is from the perspective of Joseph, a Jewish man. He has chosen a young girl to be his bride; he loves her and is looking forward to the marriage.

Suddenly his world is shattered. It is this that is portrayed so well in the play 'Nativity'. Joseph is portrayed as a Jewish carpenter who is in love. He expects Mary to be a virgin. He believes absolutely that she is in love with him, faithful to him and like him looking forward to the marriage, indeed proud of it. Then wham! his world is shattered into tiny fragments.

¹⁸ '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.'

Joseph knows nothing of this, as far as he can see Mary has been unfaithful to him, thrown his love in his face, spurned him and is defiled. In the play Nativity that hurt and anger is shown so well as Joseph in his carpenter's shop fumes and weeps with shame and hurt.

I have always been amazed at the quiet way Matthew tells this story. Simply states the fact, the child is from God. As Luke puts it,

³⁴ 'Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'

Neither Matthew nor Luke makes any problem of stating the virgin birth. Knowing it opens the story to rebuke and disbelief they simply quietly and simply tell it like it is.

For me there has never been a problem with it. If you accept that Jesus is God with us, that he is co-creator of all that is; then the power of the most high overshadowing Mary, and Jesus being born of a woman through the infinite power of God, as part of his plan for humanity, is as it should be. Faith is all about trust. Joseph had to learn to trust. Just now he is not in the mood for that. For him

Mary is just an ordinary girl and his fiancé. But Joseph also knew the danger for Mary in this society, public disgrace is the least of it and Mary could have been in grave danger. So,

¹⁹ 'Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.'

Here we see the reality of the situation from Joseph's point of view, he is angry, he is hurt but he is a good man, he loves Mary and will not put her at risk but neither can he marry her. So he decides to do the best he can, but God once more breaks through this very human scene.

²⁰ '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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²² All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'

Think of Joseph's depth of misery, anger and hurt, and then look at the above quotation. The angel, once again Gabriel, is God's messenger. The greeting is 'Joseph son of David;' it is underlying the descent of Jesus from the great king, David. The Messiah will be descended from him. Joseph knew the scriptures and he recognised Isaiah's prophecy. Then the words which turn his whole world upside down,

'for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'

Firstly, on a purely human level Mary is pure, she is honest and she loves him. There has been no betrayal. His life has been turned around in a few words. Just like the weeping Mary Magdalene at the tomb, her world was shattered, but she has it restored as she hears her Lord speak that one word, 'Mary'.

Then Joseph receives the wondrous news, this child is not any child, this is God's child, conceived by the Holy Spirit. Mary will carry him, God has entrusted you to be their protector. Wow! They are chosen and Mary's child will change the world. This child is the Messiah, long awaited and foretold by the prophets. Matthew quotes Isaiah,

²³ 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'

What that means is wonderfully and powerfully explained at the opening of John's gospel. Matthew states Jesus is Messiah, the one who will redeem his people and set them free. It is up to Joseph now. Remember no angel stands before Joseph, all this he sees as in a dream, but note how he accepts in faith and it is that faith which changes everything! Unlike Zechariah who questions when told of John's impending birth Joseph accepts without question. It is reminiscent of Mary's acceptance in wonder and humility when she hears the news.

³⁸ 'Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.'

She knew what she was risking, she knew the dangers but she also believed implicitly and her 'Yes' echoes through history and turns our world upside down.

So Joseph accepts in faith the huge commission from God,

²⁴ 'When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,'

Now they have the nurturing of the Christ child, the Messiah is a vulnerable baby in their care. What a huge and amazing responsibility and privilege.

The life of the holy family is not going to be easy.

Comberford church was dedicated to St. Mary and St. George and I remember doing a sermon on the life of Mary. What a tough time she had. A refugee not long after the birth of her child, the terror of his loss around his twelfth birthday, losing him at thirty to this dangerous life of an itinerant preacher and standing at the foot of the cross watching him die an agonising death. Yet Jesus, even as he dies on the cross, looks at her in love and consigns her to the care of John, the beloved disciple.

Not for nothing had old Simeon, who recognised the child for what he was, foretold 'a sword will pierce your own soul too.' (Luke 2.35) Indeed it had, over and over but Mary never loses faith in her Son. Mary is to experience the joy of the resurrection of her Son; Mary will receive the Holy Spirit poured out on those first believers at Pentecost. She has her joy in plenty but she suffers too.

After Jesus' youth we hear nothing of Joseph, but it is he who loved Mary who cared for her and the child. Mary and Joseph are chosen by God and they carry out their task. But Jesus will be part of a loving family,

²⁵ 'but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.'

Indeed James, Jesus' brother, will become head of the church in Jerusalem. Jesus will be brought up in Nazareth, taught his father's trade, work in his carpenter's shop. It is then at around thirty years of age he will leave his family to do the work of his Father. His mission will change the world forever and Jesus Lord and God will win our salvation and destroy death by his resurrection.

Our epistle reading is the beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans. His introduction is an amazing overview too. It is a greeting to the new Christians in Rome but first he sets out his credentials.

¹ 'Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,'

Paul is specially chosen. It all happened in that stunning flash of light on the Damascus Road. Paul was taken by the scruff of the neck, well and truly shaken, his world turned upside down. His beliefs took a seismic shift when God, in Jesus, gave his command. You Paul are mine, your name is changed, your ways are changed; turn from sin and turn to me, then take the good news out into the world. Paul is an apostle, he is sent out by his Lord whom he has seen in that light. He is on fire for the gospel and nothing can stop his determination to do his Lord's will. Paul is going out into the Gentile world, the Messiah came to the Jews but he came to 'save the world.' Jesus said to his disciples at his ascension, 'Go therefore and baptise all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome. Rome was the seat of the Empire where the Emperor, who saw himself as a god, reigned supreme. He wielded absolute power. No one was more powerful than him – or so he thought. Paul deliberately and absolutely undermines that and tells the truth of Jesus. It is a dangerous thing to do. Anyone who believes and practises it is in danger, but that is not the point. There is only one Lord. So he tells the truth of God. In a few words he sums it up,

² 'which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³ the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ and was declared to be

Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,'

Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the one the prophets told of throughout the scriptures. They were God's messengers. The Messiah is of David's line, and he is Son of God. Jesus Christ was crucified, he died but he defeated death and at his resurrection he won life and salvation for all humanity. The Messiah is not just for the Jews but for all people.

⁵ 'through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶ including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.'

This then is Paul's commission. Jesus, Christ has called him to take this good news, this gospel to the Gentiles. He is God's messenger and he is calling all to Christ including the new Roman Christians. His blessing follows,

⁷ 'To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

And his prayers for them,

⁸ 'First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. ⁹ For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, ¹⁰ asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you.'

It is worth remembering the danger these Christians were in in Rome, the heart of the Empire. Their new found belief turns the world's values on its head. There is to be no doubt, Caesar is not lord. There is only one Lord and that is Jesus the Christ, him alone will they worship, he is part of the Godhead. They must live in Jesus' way and take the good news out into the world.

This Christmas may we turn again to Jesus, the God who came down as a vulnerable child at Bethlehem, to Jesus who loves us and walks with us every day of our lives.

May I wish you all a peaceful and blessed Christmas.

'Hail, the heav'n born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness. Light and life to all he brings.'

Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Martin Madan

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