



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Fourth Sunday before Advent

readings, [Isaiah 7.10-16](#), [Romans 1.1-7](#), [Matthew 1.18-end](#)

18th December 2022

It is the season of nativity plays and the stories that accompany them. One comes to my mind which opens with the scene at the inn. Joseph approaches the innkeeper asking for a room in which to stay. The innkeeper responds, "can't you see the 'no vacancy' sign." "Yes" replies Joseph, but insists, "can't you see that my wife is expecting a baby any minute?". "Well" replies the innkeeper "that's not my fault". "Well actually" says Joseph, "it's not mine either".

It's a comic moment for those parents watching their children perform but, of course, it deals with a far from comic scenario. I begin with it, in part because our Gospel today is one in which Joseph takes centre stage, but also because it gives us a hint that there is trouble ahead.

We're very used to focusing on Mary on this final Sunday of Advent, and we'll call her to mind when we light the fourth candle towards the end of the service, but today's text actually takes us on another route.

That's because we are now in the world of Matthew's Gospel and a reminder that there are actually two Christmas stories that sit in the New Testament. Luke's account, which we're much more used to hearing, in which Mary is a key player, and is full of light and joy; and then there is Matthew's version, and this has a different emphasis.

In the first instance, it alerts us to the prominent role that Joseph plays in the stories of Jesus' birth, and we get a sense of this right from the outset, in a passage which is seldom read and which precedes today's Gospel.

Here, Matthew gives us, in effect, Joseph's genealogy, despite him not being Jesus' biological father; and the Gospel writer goes on to mention him by name on seven occasions; more than Mary's four. And though Matthew may not actually give Joseph anything to say, he will receive four angelic messages in his dreams.

Significantly, I think, in the way the story is told by Matthew, Mary's pregnancy is clearly Joseph's problem and not hers; the fate of Mary and her child will depend, not on her obedience, but on his. In fact, what Mary believes or thinks is immaterial; in Matthew's account, she isn't in a position to decide or to take any initiative.

This, of course, is a stark reminder that the cultural procedures in place at the time were devised entirely for the benefit of the man and, to a lesser degree, for the fathers of the families involved. They assumed that the husband had authority over his wife, and were designed to establish and maintain his power.

So at first, before his encounter with the angel, the dilemma that Joseph faces in today's Gospel is not whether to divorce Mary; that's clear, he will have to do that as her pregnancy could ruin everything; all that he can do is to try and limit the shame and disgrace of it.

His initial dilemma, then, is whether he keep the matter between the two families, or bring it out into the open in order to discover who is the real father. And we read that he decides to opt for the former, no doubt hoping that word doesn't slip out.

It's a difficult and dark state of affairs that Matthew is painting, in which a pregnant young girl is likely to bring disgrace, not only upon herself, but upon her child and her whole family.

And if we choose to read on in Matthew, the danger doesn't end there. For him, Jesus is born too close to the centre of power, especially to Herod. After the news of his birth is spread by the magi, a terrible massacre of babies and infants takes place, leaving Joseph, Mary and Jesus as refugees in a strange land.

It is then perhaps understandable that our typical children's nativity play rarely draws on Matthew, except in his story of the Magi, but then they tend to be turned into wise men or benevolent kings; the fear they engender in the hearts of Herod and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the slaughter that follows in their wake, is generally left aside.

In Matthew's account, then, the breeze of human frailty and the storm of men's concern for their power and their honour threaten to snuff out the light that comes with the baby; and it nearly succeeds, it nearly succeeds.

BUT it doesn't. And it doesn't because Joseph finds himself in his own annunciation story and the whole thing is turned around. What makes all the difference is the angel's message telling Joseph that the child in Mary's womb is 'from the Holy Spirit'.

Those four words 'from the Holy Spirit' can be interpreted in various ways; but, in effect, what they did for Joseph was to transform his outlook.

By them, he came to learn that his fear of being faced by what seemed like a tragedy so large that both his and Mary's family would be consumed by it, was unfounded. He understood that the Spirit of God was, albeit beyond his comprehension, somehow at work here. And that he was being called to do the human and compassionate thing; namely, to take Mary home, and adopt the child. And as a result, disgrace is transformed by grace, and is turned to hope.

Annunciation stories like this appear throughout the Scriptures, a number of them being in this Advent season, as it leads into Christmas. Each has a uniqueness but all of them speak of hopes and expectations raised far beyond what had been thought possible.

Each one is an indication of God's commitment to his world and its people, offering light in the midst of darkness. And today's Gospel is no exception. It proclaims a God who takes the risk of coming into the heart of our pain and disgrace in order to redeem and transform.

The English poet, Kathleen Raine, produced a series of poems on the Incarnation, on God coming to us in Christ. And in one of them, a child stands on the threshold of life, where it is warned not to enter a place so full of pain. 'Go back, my child, says a voice, for in this house there is sorrow and pain.' To which the child replies: 'I will not go back for sorrow and pain, For my true love weeps within and waits for my coming.'

For Raine, this child is the Christ who comes to a world in desperate need of him.

I don't know about you but sometimes I hear of a book and think, 'I really need to read that.' It happened to me this week, in relation to one of P.D. James' novels, written thirty years ago. Some of you may be familiar with it; it's called 'The Children of Men', a post-apocalyptic novel which was adapted into an award winning film of the same.

Apparently, the story focusses on a man compelled to protect a young pregnant woman from harm; the catch is that because no-one has been able to conceive in decades, humanity is close to disappearing altogether, and this unborn child may prove to be the last best hope for both civilization and humanity.

Given this information, it's unsurprising that it's full of theological and, more specifically, incarnational allegory; of God coming amongst us as a human being.

As the review I read described it, it forces the reader to experience the emotions of a human race that wonders about God's providence & reflects on the possibilities of God's care. In an exchange between two of the characters, the one says, 'If He (ie. God) wants belief, He'd better provide some evidence.' 'That he exists?' replies the other... 'That he cares' says the first character. That he cares.

Today's Gospel proclaims not only that God does come to us, and against the odds, but more than that. He comes because he cares, he comes because he cares, and so, however threatening the darkness, light and hope remain. "And they shall name him Emmanuel' which means 'God is with us'." Amen

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