

Sermon for 18th December 2022, Year A, Advent 4

Preached at St Michael the Archangel, Smarden

Matthew 1:18-25

Sermon

Typically, when I do my research for a sermon, after a bit of thought and prayer and reading, there's usually a single theme or idea that comes through wanting to be expressed on Sunday morning, and so I set off, tapping away happily on my keyboard, until that thought begins to emerge, like a sculpture appearing gradually from a block of stone.

This reading from the beginning of Matthew's gospel, however, is quite different. The commentaries I consulted came up with at least three ideas to talk about, and all of them vitally important in their own way.

First, there is the curious question of Jesus's parentage.

The gospel of Matthew begins with a very long genealogy proving that Jesus is descended from King David's line, and thereby fulfilling all those prophecies about the Messiah of Israel being a son of David... except that Jesus is only a son of David if he's Joseph's son, which the rest of chapter one goes to great lengths to show us that he's not, because Mary is a virgin until Jesus is born.

This is very awkward. What is Matthew trying to say?

Well, first, we need some context. Matthew's gospel is, unlike the other three, very much directed at the Jewish people of the first century and is therefore entirely written using their religious ideas and expectations as a framework for understanding who Jesus is and what he is about.

The Jews were looking for a Messiah, a King who would save them from their oppressors, which at that moment meant the Romans. There were specific

prophecies about the Messiah, particularly from Isaiah, that said he would be born in Bethlehem of the line of King David. There was also a belief he would be born from a virgin, which came from a Greek translation of Isaiah 7.

And so, Matthew has Jesus being born in Bethlehem, Mary is the prophesied virgin, and, equally importantly, Joseph is the one who names Jesus.

In that culture, if a man named a child, then he is acknowledging him as his own. From that point on, shared blood and chromosomes didn't matter. Once Joseph names Jesus 'Jesus', the boy is his son and Jesus becomes a son of King David of the town of Bethlehem, just as the prophecies said.

In the mind of Matthew and his first readers, there is therefore no conflict whatsoever between Mary being a virgin and Jesus still being from the line of King David through Joseph. It's an unexpected twist for sure, but unexpected twists are what we expect from God, if that doesn't sound too paradoxical.

The second curious question raised by this passage also concerns Jesus's parentage, but in a different sort of way.

Ever since we came to understand the biology of reproduction with its pairing of XX or XY chromosomes from a child's parents, some Christians have wondered what it means in biological terms for Jesus to be born of a human mother and divine father. Did it mean that God designed a specific Y chromosome for Jesus unrelated to any living man? And, if so, did that mean that Jesus was some kind of hybrid human, half human and half divine?

This is of course completely heretical according to the ancient councils of the Church, who very definitely declared that Jesus is both fully human *and* fully divine. It was vital, in fact, for Jesus to be fully both, since a half-human Jesus could never be a perfect example or sacrifice for us, and a half-divine Jesus couldn't convey the fullness of the divine presence living among us.

So it's perhaps not surprising that many Christians in recent decades started to doubt this idea of a 'virgin birth'. Even if you're fine with miracles, when you start to ask what it might mean in practice it becomes rather harder to understand.

The situation is hardly remedied by a closer examination of the ancient prophecies from Isaiah. The word that is translated 'virgin' in the Greek version of the scriptures is just 'young woman' in the original Hebrew, which Matthew would have been less familiar with. To have the Messiah being born of a 'young woman' has none of the miraculous implications of the later Greek translation.

So why translate 'young woman' as 'virgin' in the first place? Well, it turns out that the word is often used by the prophets to refer specifically to Israel, so the prophecy could originally have simply meant that the Messiah would come out of the virgin Israel. No requirement there for Mary herself to be a virgin. Perhaps Matthew tied himself up in knots unnecessarily?

This is why many Christians have found the virgin birth to be the Church's most difficult teaching to accept. It is problematic from a historical perspective, a theological perspective, and from a modern perspective, making it perhaps even more challenging to accept than the Resurrection.

But this is all very complicated stuff. We are simple people and we have no time for highfalutin ideas that soar over our heads, leaving us confused and cold. If there's one thing I know about God it's that he never requires his children to have brains the size of planets to understand his message of peace and goodwill.

Often, while the people with PhD's are discussing the finer details of translation and interpretation in their pulpits and ivory towers, Jesus is probably hanging out with the ordinary people, making them feel better about themselves, inspiring them to kindness and compassion, loving them into inexpressible joy.

Maybe these ordinary people are also really anxious because they are secretly longing for a perfect Christmas with flawless and elaborate preparations, dictated by the conventions of our culture, surrounded by perfect family togetherness.

Except that for most of us, Christmas will not be perfect. Things will go wrong, food will be burned, families will fall out, get sick, or not show up; our tempers will be frayed. Our bodies may be suffering pains we cannot manage. This may be our first Christmas without the one with whom we have shared our life.

Perhaps this is the true message of the story of Jesus's birth, not that he was the perfect culmination of a perfect family and a perfect lineage, but that he was born to a mother whose pregnancy was a scandal, who almost lost her husband, who was lucky not to be stoned to death, who gave birth among the animals, and who later had to flee to Egypt to avoid the murdering intentions of the king.

This was not the life that Mary had longed for, and it was not the life that Joseph had longed for. They had no desire to be rebellious, out there on the fringes of society: outcasts and refugees. They wanted to be normal and belong. But if we believe this story then it shows us a God who continually does things in an unexpected way to extravagantly love and include all the people most would reject or ignore. I suspect it may often be the most unexpected events, dragging us way outside convention, that are the best signs that God is at work.

We could argue all day and night about the meaning of the virgin birth and its connection to ancient prophecy, but I'd rather not. I'd rather look at how God takes a wounded and broken family, rejected and scorned, and makes them the centre of his love, the place where he chooses to be born. For are we not all Mary, living in difficult, imperfect circumstances, yet continually giving birth to God?