

Advent 3
12/12/2004

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 7:10-16
Psalm 80
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

God with us in the birth of a child: Joseph's difficulty and ours.

The rhythm of Advent differs from that of Lent. Lent descends from Ash Wednesday through a penitential season to the dark abyss of Passion Week and Good Friday, before the new life of Easter bursts suddenly upon us. Advent on the other hand is less penitential. It begins with the first glimmer of light and rises in a steady crescendo to the full light of Christmas. This rhythm is symbolized in the custom we follow of lighting the four Advent Candles and then the Christ Candle on Christmas Day. We follow another custom here, which is that on the fourth Sunday of Advent we have a service of Carols and Lessons in which the story of our salvation is unfolded to us in scripture and song. This is a good and popular practice, but it means we do not have the chance to reflect in depth on the readings for the fourth Sunday of Advent. For this reason we have heard the readings for Advent 4 today, which enables us to reflect on Matthew's account of the birth of Christ.

Matthew is always at great pains to show that what happened in connection with Jesus Christ was in fulfilment of Scripture. In so doing he takes the text from Isaiah concerning a young woman having a Son whose name would be Immanuel and reinterprets it for his own day. In their original context of the 8th C BC Isaiah's words did not have a messianic reference. Ahab was King of Judah, the South, which included Jerusalem, which was under siege due to an alliance between the kingdom of the North, Israel, and neighbouring Syria. In these dark and troublesome times the sign of Immanuel was given to Ahab to indicate that despite his fear, and the death and starvation that seemed imminent, he should trust in the power of God rather than the power of political alliances. Ahab refused the sign, but God indicated the action would take place: the birth of a child will signify that divine power will prevail in history, the throne of David will be saved, and Ahab will therefore be shamed. In the midst of great stress it was not a military victory but a birth that would signal God's continuing presence with the people. According to Matthew in his day God intervened in history in a manner consistent and recognizable with God's actions in the past. A child is promised to particular people in a particular place and time, as it was to Sarah and Abraham. Mary is one of a series of mothers who know the gift of life from God: this child is a sign God is with us.

To our eyes the story as it unfolds is outrageous. Unlike Luke's version, Matthew shows Mary as totally passive - not very good for modern readers! There is a report of virginal conception, which shocked Joseph as it does us. Then everything is put right by the visit of an angel! We read this text quite differently to the way Matthew's original audience would have done. We get caught up on virginal conception, whereas Matthew is much more concerned to have us know that Joseph was of the house of David - which made Jesus a Son of David and heir of the messianic promise. When God intervened in history Matthew tells us it was through David's ancient line. It was Joseph's obedience as a son of David that allowed the work of God to go forward. Luke makes much more

of Mary's YES, but it is implied in Matthew. A daughter of Zion helped realise Israel's destiny by putting herself fully at God's disposal. And as for angels, Jewish mysticism speculated greatly about the number and rank of angels, but Matthew is very restrained and less given to think miraculously. An angel is a messenger: one who encounters us, addresses us, and causes us to set our feet on a new path of life. An angel is whatever reality brings us the life-changing word from outside ourselves.

Matthew and Luke take quite different approaches to the birth stories, but they agree on one thing - Jesus was conceived of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. In the Creed we say:

For us and our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.

There is no escaping the fact that for most people this is a difficult and tantalising section. Our interest in this is so different from the authors that it is difficult for us to hear what they were intending to say. Modern thought is concerned with gynaecology and whether a virgin birth is possible. We should not wipe out all interest in miracle or mystery here, but in the context of the day childbirth was understood to come from the life producing creative force of God which might act in surprising ways. The idea of a virgin birth was well known and meant little more than that a particular child was given to the world by God. The virgin birth is a theological statement; a way of saying this child was intended and brought to pass through the will of God. In this context it declares the Spirit of God was, from the beginning, fully present in the life of this child who was the embodiment of God's creative holiness. But this did not happen on its own. The receptivity of Mary and the obedience of Joseph allowed the will of God to become "fully human" - subject to all the limitations we know in human history. The Gospel goes further, it shows us that God's power gives life and brings it to perfection. Jesus' life continued to be at one with God's will. This is where Paul's words compliment Matthew today, linking the presence of the Spirit in the Son of David to the power revealed in the Resurrection.

In the Virgin Birth two things come together: spirit and history, mystery and flesh. The ancient people knew God as timeless and bodiless, and understood there were no stories to tell about God's life in itself. God could only be spoken of in terms of action and revelation in the world, generated through the things that we know. What they aimed to say was that in Jesus God's everlasting word, which otherwise seems so far off and mysterious, was fully present to us in this man who stands within history, in a particular time and place. The power for renewal in Jesus is entirely consistent with the power on which all things depend. He was pure grace and pure promise. In him was life, and that life transmitted and translated God's new act of creativity to the world. He shows that God's will is to love us, despite everything we know which gives God no cause to do so. This is what saves us from our sins - our alienation from God and our inability to do God's will. Therefore with him we are set free from the past. We need no longer to stay locked in patterns driven by fear or guilt. Because of him we can live a new life.

The Advent candles burn a little brighter today. There is more light and something is growing: we are closer to the birth than before. But it has not happened yet: still we must wait. The mood and sequence of Advent is different from Lent, but there is one thing that holds for both seasons: each of them call us to journey on, trusting in the

promise of what is to come. And that promise is a promise of life, which is why there is deep and overflowing joy at the end of this journey. Thanks be to God.