

Advent 3
12/12/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 7:10 - 16
Psalm Benedictus
Romans 1:1 – 7, 17 - 19
Matthew 1:18 - 25

Son of David Son of God: Immanuel – God with us

Memory and history go together in ways that are sometimes surprising and instructive. When I was on the trail of my Great-great grandfather, Samuel Smith I contacted a person in South Australia who was descended from the family Samuel married into in 1867. He said: “Samuel Smith, he was a good worker but a poor manager. He used to say: ‘I invented the soft shelled almond but someone stole it from me.’” By that time I had collected the hard-core historical facts of the man, but this story not only told me something about how one family had constructed his memory, it brought him to life in a new way. Factual or not this story fleshed out the picture by conveying a sense of his spirit.

Two things are said about Jesus in the first chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, which uses language based on the word genesis - beginning. The long genealogy laid out in the first 17 verses looks like a boring list of names, but it shows that Jesus was real flesh and blood, a human being in every sense, of the family of David, within the faith of Abraham.

When we reach verse 18, the writer tells us the second thing about Jesus’ genesis: he was a child of God. The Holy Spirit had mysteriously invaded Mary and Joseph’s life and Jesus’ life had its genesis in the creative energizing power of God. Mary is one of several women in the Bible, such as Hannah and Sarah, whose pregnancy is interpreted as a sign of the active, creative energy of God. Whereas we think this involves the suspension of the laws of natural science, the ancient writers were simply saying, what they say at other places: God creates and life appears where nothing of the sort was expected.

Joseph was disturbed and did not know how to read the circumstances. But he slept on it, and was wise enough to believe the message that came from an angel in a dream. Like Mary in Luke, he is receptive to the work of God, and became a companion in God’s efforts to make a difference in the world. What Joseph did might seem to be to cover things over, but in fact the name he was told to give the child shows that Joseph’s actions were for the future, not the past: he supported what God was working for, not what he wanted for himself.

Matthew is always keen to show that what happened in connection with Jesus Christ was in fulfilment of Scripture. In so doing he takes the text from Isaiah 7:10 - 16 concerning a young woman having a son whose name would be Immanuel and reinterprets it for his own day. This is memory planted into a current episode of the history of God’s work in the world to make a point.

In their original context of the 8th century BC Isaiah's words did not have a messianic reference, the name or relationship of the woman is not given and virginity was not the issue. It was all about the timing of the birth [Wallace]. Isaiah spoke to the troublesome King Ahaz who ruled Judah, the South, which included Jerusalem, when it was under threat from an alliance between the kingdom of the North, Israel, and neighbouring Syria. Ahaz thought to get out of his predicament by forming another alliance, but Isaiah challenged him to trust in something deeper for his future. While armies were massing on the borders, Ahaz was called to trust in the power of God rather than the power of political alliances, because within the time it took for a child to be born, the kingdoms he feared would be laid waste. Ahaz refused the sign and lost the battle. The birth of a child was a sign that that divine power would prevail regardless of kingly power. The God of Abraham operates in weakness, throws down the mighty and raises up the poor.

Matthew makes use of this image at a time when Rome was in control of the land. Timing matters, but identity matters more and he uses virgin in a way Isaiah does not. He relates it more to Greek ideas of pregnancy in which, if a father is not present the child is seen as a divine gift. For Matthew Emmanuel means God will be present in history in a manner recognizable with God's actions in the past: a child will be born. But Matthew is very clear two things come together: flesh and spirit. This child is a son of David, and this child is a son of God.

If we only had Paul and Mark, we would know Jesus was born of a woman of the line of David (Rom 1:1 – 3 and Gal 4:4) and that he had a mother from whom he seemed to be estranged (Mk 3:20-21, 31-35), but we would know nothing of what some read in Matthew and Luke as scandal, and there would have less material to fuel the issue of the virgin birth. But the evidence suggests that regard for Mary and her status as a virgin were strongly present in the memory of the church long before she was formally declared to be *Theotokos*, the Mother of God in 431 CE. The pressure to develop memory and history into a doctrinal framework came because of continuing questions about the relationship between divinity and humanity as focussed in Jesus. Mary was drawn into the discussion, where she had been from the beginning.

There is no escaping the fact that for most people the line in the Creed that says: Jesus became *incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary* is as difficult as it is tantalising. Our interest in this is so different from the authors that it is difficult for us to hear what they were intending to say. At the recent conference for Norman Young Sandy Yule conducted a dialogue between two voices with different beliefs. At one point he said :

The point of the creed is that we meet God in Christ, not that natural laws were suspended at his birth. This is why I am still prepared to say 'born of the Virgin Mary', as the Creed has it. A miracle is an experience in which we are somehow touched by God with a blessing. What happens to the laws of nature in the experience is hardly relevant, however interesting. [Used with permission.]

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. In him spirit and history, mystery and flesh come together. The power for renewal embodied 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 that gives God no cause to do so. This is what saves us from alienation from God and our inability to do God's will. Because of him we can live a new life.

The Advent candles burn a little brighter today. There is more light and we are closer to the birth than before. But it has not happened yet: still we must wait. The call of Advent is to journey on, trusting in the promise of what is to come. The promise is a promise of life, which is why there is deep and overflowing joy at the end of this journey. Let us continue to wait, in peace and hope and joy.
