

Sermon

Sunday 22 December 2013

Lessons

Romans 1: 1 – 7

St Matthew 1: 18 – 25

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Holy Wisdom, Word that proceeds from the Most High, reaching from the beginning to the end, and graciously ordering all things; come, teach us Your way of understanding; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

St Paul said that he was an apostle of Jesus Christ, a bondservant, 'separated to the gospel of God'. That gospel, said Paul, concerns God's Son 'who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh.' In the Gospel of Matthew, the first evangelist tells us that Jesus is born of a virgin. The Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.' If you were challenged by an atheist, another Christian or an enquirer, 'Do you believe in the Virgin Birth?', what would you say?

The great twentieth century theologian, Karl Barth, and the Pontiff Emeritus, Pope Benedict, would answer an unequivocal 'Yes'. To the question, 'Is Jesus the Only Begotten Son of God...who by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary?', the theological giants of our time, Barth and Benedict, would say 'Yes!' Quoting Barth, Benedict

says that there are two moments in the story of Jesus when God intervenes directly in the material world: the virgin birth and the resurrection from the tomb. These two moments, says Benedict, are scandalous to the modern spirit. He argues that we ‘allow’ God to act in ideas and thoughts, in the spiritual domain, but not in the material world. The Pope says, ‘That is shocking.’ He says, ‘God is God and he does not operate merely on the level of ideas....If God does not have power over matter, then he simply is not God.’ What do you say?

Sometimes people confuse the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception with the Virgin Birth. The Immaculate Conception is Mary, not Jesus. It is a Roman Catholic doctrine which seeks to preserve the *sinlessness* of Jesus. According to tradition, Jesus’ ‘father’ is God the Holy Spirit, Who is without sin, and to preserve the sinlessness of Jesus, Mary too must be without sin. Hence, *her* conception in *her* mother’s womb is described as immaculate, albeit that she had a human father. I’m not going to ask you if you believe in the Immaculate Conception....that is for another day! Two of the greatest figures in theology, Reformed and Roman Catholic, believe in the Virgin Birth: do you?

From time to time, we hear from biblical scholars and others that there is ‘evidence’ of the historicity of the Christmas story. ‘Evidence’ includes

‘a great conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter’ which may account for the star appearing in the east. According to a professor from the Austrian State Observatory, Jupiter and Saturn stood still together in the western sky and would have been clearly visible above Bethlehem. Two or three years ago archaeologists found a burial site not far from Bethlehem; it was a mass grave dating from the time of Herod’s reign, a grave full of the remains of infants. The argument goes that the accounts offered by the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are history and that includes the Virgin Birth.

One scholarly suggestion put forward is that Mary’s pregnancy was the result of a ‘sacred marriage’. It is argued that, in the Near East, in a ‘sacred marriage’ the high priest or king played the part of a divine messenger and that the offspring of that union was regarded as a son of god, a divine being or an ‘avatar’ who incarnated god. The suggestion is that Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, was the priest at the time of Mary’s conception. Mary stayed three months in the house of Zacharias before returning to her home. In the Gospel of Luke, once told by the angel Gabriel that she will conceive by the Holy Spirit, Mary *with haste* makes her way to the home of Zacharias. So, not a *virgin* birth at all! What do you think?

The American television and radio host Larry King was once asked who in history would he most like to interview. King said, 'Jesus....and I would ask him if he was indeed virgin-born, because that answer would define history for me.' The evangelical minister, David Robertson, who is the Director of the Solas Centre for Public Christianity, writes:

The Christmas story is not primarily a cute wee tale of a lovely baby, gently lying on a bed of straw. Neither is it primarily a story about poverty, oppression and social injustice. It is not a 'human' story to remind us how wonderful humans are, and how we should all get on well together. It is the story of God's answer to the question, 'If you love us so much, what have you done to help us in our darkness?' His answer: 'I gave my one and only Son.'

The Virgin Birth is in the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed; it was affirmed in the sixteenth century by the reformers. What do we make of the Birth narratives in the Gospels?

In the ancient world, there were many stories of virgin births, at least some of which were challenged on literal grounds. Claims that the Greek general Alexander and the Roman general Scipio were of divine conception were described as 'empty and absurd' by the first century Roman historian Livy. The second century Greek historian Plutarch found it 'hard to believe' that any god would take 'carnal pleasure in a mortal body.' The myths across the Near East do vary in their detail and, at times, were challenged as to their integrity but the belief that a god

could unite with a human being was understood and accepted. What can we say – rational, sensible, spiritual people of Mayfield Salisbury?

The first point to make is that the Birth narratives are not literal history; they never were. Perhaps the first clue comes in the genealogies, which are given by Matthew and Luke. The genealogies are not the same; they undeniably serve a *theological* purpose. In the case of Matthew, the evangelist splits up the forty two generations into three sections of fourteen: Abraham to King David, King David to the exile in Babylon and the exile in Babylon to the birth of Jesus. The very first thing Matthew tells us is that Jesus is to be understood as being of at least equal importance to Abraham, King David and what God did in the exile. Matthew writes of the Christ, the Messiah, while Luke uses the term ‘Son of God’.

Here’s the heart of the matter: Jesus was not the only son of God born and living at that time in the Mediterranean. There was another who had a genealogy and divine conception: Caesar Augustus, the Emperor of Rome at the time Jesus was born. Caesar’s lineage, published twenty years or so before Jesus was born, went back to the goddess Venus. Suddenly, the otherwise uninteresting genealogies in Matthew and Luke together with the Virgin Birth narratives take on a social, political and

economic as well as a spiritual meaning. In Matthew's Gospel the writer mentions again and again that this birth will be by the Holy Spirit and in Luke's Gospel we are told that Jesus will be the Son of the Most High. The writers are saying that Jesus is the Son of the One true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses, King David and Solomon.

You may remember that on Palm Sunday Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem from the east, humbly on a donkey, with His disciples waving palm branches. At the same time, the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, is entering in great procession from the west. Jesus' deliberate action is provocative and prophetic. It is a direct challenge to the Roman authorities and a claim that God is not found in worldly status and power and in the aggression and oppression of the Empire. In the Birth narratives, the Early Church is making a similar claim. God is not to be found in the palaces of Rome but in a stable in Bethlehem, not in the most powerful man in the world, but in penniless teacher from Nazareth born in a stable. It is myth, but it is the Church's truth about God. What immense courage the Early Church must have had. The Birth narratives have become, at best, cute and, at worst, religious nonsense. In truth, they make the boldest claims on how we live and the values we hold.

It is no surprise that the Early Church has used the imagery of a Virgin Birth: it makes a powerful point in the language and culture of the day but we've got lost in literalism and biology. To my mind, a virgin birth is not dissimilar to many Old and New Testament stories in which God brings life out of those who are described as 'barren' or 'aged'. For myself, the ancients were groping for language to describe special, unique people who possessed transcendental qualities, extraordinary gifts in a human world. The Spirit of God continues to shine brilliantly through Jesus – I have no doubt about that – but I wonder if we used the language of the first-century Near East would we speak of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela as a 'son of God', a 'child of God'? I do not equate any of them with Jesus but I wonder if the mythology of the Virgin Birth, at its deepest level, is trying to point us to the spiritual nature of life. It is not only a condemnation of Roman, worldly power; it is a critique of this material universe, which can never grant us the peace and wholeness we crave.

Let me close with this. The British composer, John Tavener, who died recently, premiered his Requiem in Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral. Drawing on the texts of Sufi poetry, the Catholic Mass, the Koran, Hindu words from Upanishad, Tavener said, 'Our glory lies where we cease to exist.' His music, like his personal journey, sought nothing less than to

achieve union with God. In the language of the day, in the story of the Virgin Birth, the Early Church is telling us that Jesus was a unique image of the Invisible God, that in Jesus of Nazareth, they saw and felt God. Through Jesus, they felt close to God, at one with God. I believe that, and it's got nothing to do with biology.

Amen.