

## **Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent 2010**

In Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus, Mary gets full play: Madonna and Child, front and center, the only distinct figures. Others are relegated to background status, shepherds, Magi, angels, even Joseph. But Matthew's gospel puts Joseph in the foreground.

Let's look at Matthew's story once more. Joseph finds Mary is pregnant and he is not the father. Swirling around the text are deep cultural and moral values. Mary must have committed adultery is his conclusion. She is no longer a virgin which makes her 'less valuable'. Mary is pregnant with someone else's child. What a disaster in families of the ancient world where keeping the family intact was vital and where inheritance was endangered by children born of men outside the extended family. Virginity was worth a high price, monetarily. Women were a commodity. Joseph had been cheated by another male. The whirl of values carries with it assumptions which we rightly question today. The value of a woman is not her virginity, but as a person. If there is wrong done, it is to Mary.

For Matthew, Joseph is a righteous man. This means Joseph will choose the less demeaning option for Mary; not public humiliation, but private divorce. Adultery required divorce, but it could also mean stoning.

However, the drama does not end with divorce or stoning but a divine intervention. God created the pregnancy. This does not assume intercourse, but it does assume a botanical understanding of reproduction according to which the 'seed' has to be planted in the woman who is like the garden in whom the seed grows until birth.

In the wonder at what Jesus became, Matthew's community has merged memories of divine interventions in the Old Testament to enable sterile woman to become pregnant with popular stories of miraculous pregnancies to offer another explanation of how Jesus, born of Mary, could become who he became and without slurring Mary. It is a wonderful story of a conception created by God, Some will sustain belief in the story; others will read its fabulous assertions with a faith that affirms its intentions while not espousing the biology.

Most importantly, I think, this story of Joseph and the incarnation tells us not to take the easy path of pretense and denial. Joseph faced up to the fact that the young woman he had promised to marry was pregnant, and not by him.

Joseph's righteousness was more profound than simply observing laws and customs. It was a righteousness that grew out of God's presence in his life, a righteousness that allowed him to hear the angelic voice of his dream and obey its commands. As a righteous man, he could look directly at the reality which now confronted him, see it and all its implications fully, and do God's bidding without regard for his own reputation. He could accept the angel's word that the child was of the Holy Spirit. He could also accept the duty, usually assumed by the mother, of naming the baby.

Matthew's narrative doesn't record a single word from Joseph, in marked contrast to Luke's record of Mary's "Let it be with me according to your word." Joseph just acts upon the revelation received in his dream.

Matthew overlays the birth story with a popular etymology of Jesus' name. He comes to save his people from their sins. The disaster of 70 CE with the destruction of the temple, illustrates the failure of that aim with many of his people, according to Matthew. But some did respond. Matthew's community treasured the passage we read from Isaiah. Unlike the Hebrew which speaks of a young woman giving birth, the Greek unambiguously speaks of a virgin and her child as Emmanuel. Originally it was heard as a promise that Judah would gain relief from the impending threat from the alliance of northern Israel and Syria. The verse, excised from that context, becomes a promise of God's presence to bring deliverance in any age. In Jesus' ministry God is with us! That is the point of the tapestry of allusions Matthew shares here. For the birth narratives are not really about the baby Jesus; but they are about the Jesus crucified under the banner 'King of the Jews'.

The Christmas stories always need connecting with the grown up Jesus if they are not to be sentimentalized. Note that they are missing from Mark, the earliest gospel and from John, the last gospel in Scripture. The magic of angels and the virginal conception are the

embellishments to enable us to celebrate Jesus life of compassion and self giving. In their own way they give us the radical message of inclusiveness: of women, of Gentiles, of the sexually suspect, of a pregnant girl. The birth stories lay before us the violence which grace confronts: the all maleness, the righteous Law observance, the willingness to abandon or stone the pregnant girl, the murderous ruler, the slaughtered children, the aspiration to kill 'the king of the Jews'. We have to work hard to keep it all from being reduced just more Christian naiveté in a world where the same geography and the same issues exist.

Can Joseph call us to open our eyes this morning and act upon the revelations we have received? Are we mired in pretense and denial? Do we pretend that everything is going to be OK when the crescendo of evidence that all is far from well grows to a deafening level? Too often we refuse to see the systemic problems or address them.

As I think about my own response, I am reminded of serving the homeless this week at our soup kitchen. I know that what we are doing is good, but not nearly enough. It seems that the words merry Christmas we say to our guests are meant for us and only a distant dream for the homeless. The Scripture today reminds us that we cannot remain speechless regarding the poor and lowly; we must speak up with the clear sight of Joseph and the willingness to risk all that Mary offered to God.

**Source material--The Rev. Elizabeth Morris Downie and William Loader.**