Sermon for 4th Advent Year A

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25.

i

The promise of a new baby was always a sign of hope and the naming of a child was a portentous moment, as if deciding the child’s name somehow sealed its future destiny. Even today such notions are not altogether misplaced. The greater the wealth and power of a family the greater the care given to choosing meaningful, or portentous names – and royal babies with their string of highly significant names are a prime example of this.

In the UK at least, certain names give away immediately the socio-economic class of the child and thereby induce a host of unconscious assumptions and attitudes which will either help or harm the child over the years. Other ranks in the British army refer to an officer as a ‘Rupert’ – and no British person needs to have that explained.

This child is to be called, ‘Immanuel’, meaning, ‘God is with us.’ After this point, the whole passage descends into confusion which scholars continue to argue about.

The first argument is whether this is intended as good news or bad news to Ahaz.

Ahaz is invited by God to ask for any sign that he likes, but refuses to name one, hiding behind a pious quotation from Deuteronomy about not putting the Lord to the test - which is a bit illogical since God has invited him to choose one.

Ahaz, however, would rather not have a sign; if he did receive a sign, a visible, obvious, tangible message from God, then he would be obliged to follow it. Ahaz prefers to keep his options open rather than be pinned down by God’s instructions.

So Isaiah gives him a sign of a baby which is to be born and before the child is old enough to know right from wrong, the Lord will bring on Ahaz and the house of David such times as they have not known since the disaster when the northern kingdom Ephraim broke away from the southern kingdom, Judah, in the days after Solomon.

Does eating curds and honey mean the best times since that terrible event? Is eating curds and honey about living off the fat of the land, a land once described as flowing with milk and honey? Or is it bad news, for in v22, curds and honey is all there is to eat because the Assyrians will have devastated the land? Most favour the Good News interpretation, but the matter is still debated.

The second matter that causes confusion in this text is the reference to the young woman in verse 14. In the Hebrew the word *almah* is used elsewhere in the scriptures, but each time the assumption could be in that society that the young woman in question is a virgin.

There is a more explicit term for virgin in Hebrew which Isaiah could have used, *bethulah*, but was the chief point in Isaiah’s original context that a child was to be born, rather than a virgin was to conceive? Was the original meaning that a young woman, who as yet is unmarried and a virgin, will [get married – taken for granted in that social context] and then conceive and give birth and before the child knows right from wrong, God will have acted? Scholars argue about it still.

The point is that knowing the original context of the passage and the meaning to be taken from it at the time is only the start of matter, not the end of it.

Whatever Isaiah intended about this ‘young woman’ or ‘virgin’ – *parthenos* - in the Greek version of the Old Testament, the importance for Christians is how this passage was used by Matthew.

It is not a case that in trying to dredge up OT quotations in order to claim they had been fulfilled by Christ, Matthew unfortunately went to the Greek OT and thereby inadvertently stumbled across the word ‘virgin’ rather than ‘young woman’ and therefore the Church had to subsequently invent a preposterous virgin birth story to cope with this passage it had been saddled with. A preposterous story apparently swallowed whole by the early Church and retained within the Canon of scriptures.

Much more likely, Matthew was faced with the serious problem of stories circulating about the incredible circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth – and as we see there are hints elsewhere in the NT about the parenthood of Jesus, being called the ‘son of Mary’ rather than the ‘son of Joseph’ (Mark 6:3 see Sermon for 4th Advent Year C and John 8:41).

In the light of these stories, Matthew had to find some scripture to justify what had reportedly happened. He found this in the Greek version of Isaiah 7:14.

Which of these two possibilities do you find the more persuasive? We all know the horse should come before the cart; but that presupposes we can identify which is the horse and which the cart.

ii

There is a naming ceremony going on in Romans chapter 1. It reveals the careful, considered choosing of the right names for Jesus. Everything about the name had to be carefully weighed. Precise theological content had to be expressed in the names Christians used in order to speak of Jesus.

Paul is aware that within the first few years of Christian history, the apostles are searching their scriptures, what Christians call the Old Testament, and finding prophetic pointers towards what they have experienced in the life of Christ.

It is standard practice within Christian circles to speak of the two natures of Jesus and see his earthly lineage going back to King David, thus making Jesus eligible to be the Messiah; whilst his spiritual nature comes from God himself, through the Spirit, so that Jesus is also proclaimed ‘Son of God’.

This Trinitarian formula should be noted. Furthermore, Jesus is said to be ‘our Lord’. In the OT, prophets spoke their message on behalf of ‘the Lord our God’; but now the title ‘Lord’ has been affixed to the name of Jesus.

Paul declares that the full revelation of the nature of Christ rests upon the experience of the resurrection and this is the gospel the Church is commissioned to take to the whole world.

Paul writes in this manner about Jesus within about 20 years of the crucifixion. There are some Christians in Corinth who question the resurrection of the body, probably due to Greek philosophical influences within the city, but we do not see any similar reticence within the NT about calling Jesus the ‘Son of God’ and ‘the Lord’.

These names have not been given in error, but with carefully measured and considered attention by trained theologians such as Paul among an ardently monotheistic Jewish culture where many have died in order to retain their monotheistic religion.

iii

Whilst Paul’s proclamation that Jesus is the “Son of God’ and ‘Lord’ by the power of the Holy Spirit does not demand a belief in the Virgin birth, it certainly fits with such a belief.

According to Matthew, the Virgin birth is confirmed to Joseph in a dream. This episode shows the honour and decency of both Mary and Joseph. Mary must have told Joseph of her pregnancy – and not sought the subterfuge of marrying Joseph knowing she was expecting a child without informing Joseph.

Joseph is equally honourable and decent because he is willing to step aside so that the rightful father of Mary’s baby might have the chance to marry her instead; and to do so quietly does not bring public shame onto Mary which would have jeopardised the possibility of her marrying the rightful father.

The truth is revealed to Joseph in a dream. The tradition recorded by Matthew is consistent with the names used by Paul in his *Letter to the Romans*. The child is conceived ‘by the Holy Spirit’ and will be called ‘Jesus’ because the name means, ‘the Lord saves’.

Matthew then quotes from today’s OT reading found in Isaiah; he quotes from the Greek Septuagint OT which uses the word *parthenos,* virgin.

As I said earlier; do you think Matthew accidentally stumbled on the word virgin in this passage of Isaiah and so the Church had to invent the preposterous story of a virgin birth in order to fit, with the idea that Jesus could then rival other proclaimed divine births of the Greco-Roman world? Or do you think Matthew quoted this passage because of the already circulating stories surrounding Jesus’ birth of which we get the faintest of whispers in other parts of the NT narrative of Jesus’ ministry?

As I say, it’s for you to decide which is the horse and which the cart. But how the birth of a baby in Palestine two thousand years ago can be of any decisive importance to me today unless there is some reason behind calling him ‘Son of God’ and ‘Lord’, I fail to see. But important though his birth may be, everything rests on his resurrection.

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