Sermon for 4th Advent Year B

Readings: 2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38

i

We would be wrong to assume that the story of Jesus starts with the Annunciation when Gabriel appears to Mary. None of the gospel writers start their accounts with Mary.

Mark starts with John the Baptist – thereby tying the Christian gospel to all that has gone before in the Jewish tradition, particularly the prophetic tradition. Matthew starts with Abraham, the founder of the nation which is called to be the agent through whom God will bless all families of the earth. John starts before history itself at the beginning of time when the Word was with God and the Word was God which has now come into the world.

So where does Luke start and why start there? Well, note that Luke leaves his genealogy to chapter 3, attaching it to the story of Jesus’ baptism, but it is still the conceptual beginning of his story of the coming of Christ. In Luke 3.38 Luke traces the origin of his account to Adam, the first human and the beginning of the entire human story. Adam is also the one other person in Jewish tradition born without a human father. Jesus is the new Adam, a new beginning for the entire human family.

Mary plays an obviously vital role in the coming of Christ. Today we honour her faith and courage and Joseph’s faith and loyalty. Yet both Mary and Joseph have such faith because they have been nurtured in the faith of their ancestors. All those names we see in Luke’s genealogy and all their unnamed countless contemporaries played their small part in making this the right time for God to favour Mary with his divine Son.

Many of us will play only an unnamed and unknown bit-part in the unfolding story of God’s plan of salvation, but whether named or unnamed, whether garlanded with praise by generations to come or forgotten in the flowing stream, God requires us to play our small part, so that the next great hero or heroine may be raised from the good soil of our faith tradition.

Mary was truly vital to the salvation which Christ has brought to the world, but many others made her faithfulness possible.

ii

Jesus is to be Mary’s first child; Catholic commentators would argue Mary’s only child. Leaving that particular Catholic-Protestant spat aside, there is no dispute that Jesus was Mary’s **first** child. He was also a **male** child. These factors have significant repercussions under Jewish law.

Luke tells us later that Mary and Joseph take Jesus to present him at the temple for circumcision. Luke also makes a reference to Mary and Joseph offering a ‘pair of doves’ as an offering (Luke 2:24). This offering is the traditional ‘sin’ offering for purification after childbirth. Jewish tradition believed that the experience of childbirth, rather like the experience of menstruation, caused a woman to be ritually unclean and in need of a purification offering. This is what Luke is referring to.

However, there is something that is missing. Luke goes to the trouble of mentioning the detail of the purification offering, so it is unlikely to have been just an oversight. There is no reference to the *Pidyon* *haben* or ‘redemption of the first-born son’ offering.

According to Jewish custom the birth of a first son had to be marked by a ritual sacrifice to ‘buy back’ or ‘redeem’ the child from God. The idea was that the first-born son should be dedicated to God as a priest. This became restricted to the Aaronic priestly line and the Levites, their assistants. But the first-born sons of the other tribes were expected to go through this symbolic sacrificial ritual to ‘buy their son back’ from God and allow him to lead a normal secular life. The sacrifice demanded the offering of 5 silver coins.

Clearly, there would be no intention on Mary and Joseph’s part to ‘buy back’ Jesus because they know through the Annunciation, Joseph’s dream and the virgin birth that Jesus has been born with the express purpose to serve God. John 19:23 refers to the soldiers dividing Jesus’ clothing at the crucifixion and Jesus is said to have worn a seamless robe woven in one piece from top to bottom – a type of garment usually worn by priests. The *Letter to the Hebrews* makes a major point of portraying Jesus as our eternal High Priest (Hebrews 6:20).

The absence of any reference to the ‘redemption of the first-born son’ sacrifice is another subtle support to Mary’s story that the angel Gabriel appeared to her and announced the arrival of the one who would be known as ‘Son of the Most High’.

iii

Turning to our reading from 2 Samuel 7 we see that God was reluctant to give David permission to build an earthly house for him. God seems to be saying through his prophet Nathan that he has managed perfectly well so far without a fixed stone temple. God has gone wherever David has gone in his uncertain and circuitous route to the throne. God is a mobile God – temples easily become static traditions safeguarding a static God. How then can a living God do new things?

God had shown a similar reticence in the days of Samuel and Saul to having a king ruling over Israel. Kings quickly become corrupt and usurp their power to suit their own pleasures – such as David did by taking Bathsheba from Uriah the Hittite after he espied her taking a bath from his palace ramparts.

God says seems to be saying through Samuel was that God would rather be their king himself and through Nathan saying that what God really wants is to provide a house that isn’t made of stone and precious metal, but a spiritual house that will last forever.

These things we see coming to pass in our reading from Luke’s gospel today. Mary is to give birth to the One who will rule on the throne of his father David and will reign over the house of Jacob forever (32-33). Later, we shall read that Jesus’ body is the spiritual temple and we who believe are its living stones, but that would never have been possible without Mary who lent her womb to be a temporary temple of flesh and blood for the ‘Son of the Most High’ to be born.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard – February 2017**