

Bennochy church 22nd December 2013

The circumstances around the birth of Jesus have always been a mystery to me. To be understood they need to be thought of, not as history, but as theology. In other words, what are the writers trying to communicate about God? This morning I want to look at the nativity from the perspective of the parents of Jesus.

First of all, there is this poor guy called Joseph, engaged to Mary, as binding as marriage and could only be dissolved by divorce. Yet, he seems almost superfluous to the story, in more ways than one. Like a character in an early scene of a film that you think is going to play a leading role, but who is then rarely or never seen again. I wonder how this man really felt about what was going on here. He has to undertake this long journey, with the rumour that he is not the father of Mary's child. And since the writer is interested only in the birth of God, we are told very little about Joseph. Only brief factual references are made to him after the nativity story; his dreams and the families escape to Egypt to flee from Herod the Great, their return to live in Nazareth and a reference to Jesus parents as Jesus when a young boy visits the temple. He is a 'bit part' player; we know he is there, we have watched enough nativity plays to know that, but he seems no more famous or important than the donkey Mary sat on or indeed any of the other animals that we are told who gathered around the birth of Jesus.

It was his fault anyway, that they ended up in Bethlehem in the first place. He was the one we are told descended from King David, so for the Census they travelled to his ancestral home. What a way to treat a descendent of the great king of Israel, a minor part in the story! If you are interested, Matthew 1 & Luke 3 give the genealogies and note they are both different.

Sometimes in the reformed church we are afraid to mention the place of Mary, mother of God, as we tell the nativity story. She can be cute, as children retell the story, but who was she, given this role of giving birth to God. I will repeat that. Mary gave birth to God! She was 14 at most, maybe as young as 12, with no social status. No wonder she was deeply troubled! And we know nothing of her before the events of nativity. Have you ever had an angel experience? I don't know what it means, but I am certain it was not a person dressed in white, shinning and with wings. All the passage is actually saying is that God is passing on a message to Mary. Nothing more, nothing less and this kind of encounter follows a pattern that is actually seen in other stories of the Old Testament.

If God works in mysteries ways, then this is such a mystery. Can we push apart the stage curtains and see what is 'truth' in the midst of this story, and not get sidelined by what the word 'virgin' means in the relationship of Mary and Joseph? Let's just accept that the birth of God had to be different or, the Jews had a saying that in the birth of every child, there are three partners;

father, mother and the spirit of God. So even if Jesus had an earthly father, the Spirit of God was there in a unique and special way.

I believe that what it means to be a *servant* is actually more important. It is Mary's willingness to be part of the story, no matter its consequences for her reputation and the hardships and pain that would follow. And all of this is wrapped up in the word *incarnation*, the heartbeat of the story. We should not be surprised at this mystery, as God enters the world in the way that he did. Should we expect any less, after all, this is God we are talking about!

Have you ever wondered what would have happened if the story had been different? Joseph rejects his pregnant wife and going his own way, it happens. If we believe God is in control, God would have found a way round that. Or maybe Mary feels the burden is too great and cannot enter into this partnership of incarnation with God, as the Lord's servant, and instead of a song of praise utters words of rejection. But what choice did she really have, as a young pregnant woman?

Many here will know the pressures of being a parent; the joys, the sorrows, the heartaches, those precious moments and memories; the lighter wallet..., at least Mary and Joseph didn't need to worry about the driving test and its consequences or University applications! All they had to worry about in the early days of their marriage was refugee status in Egypt to protect

their family, and Mary, in latter life, who watched her son being put to death by the Romans. And in that sentence we have travelled the lifetime of God on earth. Well, almost. The mystery of incarnation that linked the lives of Mary and Joseph became the miracle of resurrection. Joseph is off the scene, but I like to think that Mary was there, with her son. We might wonder at the mystery and miracle of that ancient story, but let us never forget that the story of the incarnated and resurrected Christ, continues in our lives. Amen.