

Sermon – Matthew 1:18-end – Advent 4 2019

In Luke's Gospel, Mary is central to his account of Jesus' birth. Matthew's account begins and ends with the name of Jesus – the Greek form of the Hebrew Joshua which means 'to save' – 'YHWH is salvation'. and in between we are given a brief account of the conception and birth, focussing on Joseph, a righteous man who doesn't fall back on the law and publicly humiliates her when Mary tells him she is with child – but rather, following a dream in which an angel of the Lord appears to him – he mercifully accepts the fact the child is conceived from the Holy Spirit and in accordance with prophecy and open to its revelation – he adopts Jesus as the child of the Holy Spirit, having himself been the recipient of the Spirit's presence through his dream.

We have to remember that Matthew is writing his Gospel for a Jewish community – encouraging them to see Jesus as the fulfilment of the prophets – the promised Messiah.

When Matthew presents the genealogy of Jesus at the beginning of his Gospel – we aren't given a family-tree history that we are used to today, but rather a theological statement – one that gives us an sense of God's divine presence within the big story of Jesus as the fulfilment of all that the prophets foretold in keeping with God's overarching salvation plan.

The first line translates into 'The genesis of Jesus Christ was this' – and draws the link between the 'genesis' of creation and the 'genesis' of Christ, the new creation.

He focusses a lot on numerology – for example, Matthew lists 42 generations – six blocks of seven names. The number seven was important – the 7th 'age' of completion and wholeness would begin and come to fruition in the birth of Jesus.

In his genealogy, Matthew establishes Jesus as the Son of David and this point is so crucial that 'David' is mentioned six times within 20 verses. Joseph as a descendent of David and through the divine act of adoption – becomes the earthly father of Jesus.

Another important number for Matthew is the number 'five'. If we take the time to look more deeply, we find five sections to his Gospel just like the five books of the Old Testament – five dreams – five scriptural fulfilments – five uses of the word 'Messiah. This is because Matthew is not only presenting Jesus as the Son of God, Son of David but also as the new Moses.

Furthermore, as well as Mary, there are four other women listed – which is unusual in itself. There is Aramaic Tamar, a Canaanite woman Rahab, Moabite Ruth and 'the wife of Uriah' who was married to a Hittite – and these point us to the idea that within David's Kingdom there is room for the inclusion of Gentiles from the beginning. And not only that – Tamar and Rahab were prostitutes and the wife of Uriah was none other than Bathsheba who had an affair with David – women of conducting seeming sexual impropriety – just as Mary would be accused of doing so as she conceives through the Holy Spirit.

This helps to point to the fact that the Holy Spirit – like then – is now at work through the conception of Jesus and also in how Mary becomes the wife of Joseph – and in the way Joseph comes to be seen and known as his father through divine adoption.

Matthew's story has God's presence woven through – and the child named by Joseph – the privilege given to fathers of that day – is also 'Emmanuel' which means 'God with us'.

The quotation from the Greek version of Isaiah 7.14 affirms Mary's conceiving, 'the virgin shall conceive'. But since Isaiah's prophecy of the birth of a child is announced to 'the house of David' (Isaiah 7.13), the quotation also affirms Joseph's act of adoption. That the child named Jesus by Joseph is also 'Emmanuel' becomes central to Matthew's story of Jesus, from beginning to end the story of God's presence.

Mary will bear a son – she will bring forth fruit from a seed. This is an another important aspect in this Gospel – Jesus will go on to say in his Sermon on the Mount (7:16) that false prophets will be known by their fruits – and that by his fruit people will come to know Jesus as the true prophet...

There is much more to be found within this birth narrative and in Matthew's Gospel throughout that points to Jesus being the fulfilment of scripture.

But there will always be the debate as to whether Luke and Matthew's birth stories are literally accurate – would our faith be affected if we didn't have any of this information? Possibly not.

But perhaps these accounts can be true for us in our own way.

Maybe the idea of a virgin birth – the story of Christ being born within an earthly body – the union of the Spirit of God within humanity – can be the story for each of us. Maybe Christ can be born within each of us – today as we take our place in the incarnational story – the story about God's salvation that comes to fruition - first as Mary says 'Yes' to God and becomes the first disciple – the first follower of Jesus as his Mother – and then in our response we say 'yes' to being faithful to the grace and apostleship we have received in our belonging to Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, who chose the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the mother of the promised saviour: fill us your servants with your grace, that in all things we may embrace your holy will and with her rejoice in your salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *CW*

Jacqueline Drake-Smith, December 2019