

Mary, Joseph, Priests and Kings      Matthew 1: 18 - end  
Beverley Minster 18.12.16  
Advent 4

If you were asked to tell “the Christmas Story” to someone, I’m sure you would, eventually, get all the elements in some sort of order. Nativity after nativity will be celebrated today. Services of Lessons and Carols will include all the right readings, and give the headlines and highlights. Do come along tonight to Churches Together, and next week to our two such services. Your telling of the story will include angels, announcements, Mary, Joseph, a manger, shepherd, magi.

There are, of course, some problems. The story as we have received it is actually told in more than one way. Matthew and Luke approach the birth of Christ from different angles, and include different events. No manger in Matthew. No magi in Luke. No flight to Egypt in Luke. No shepherds in Matthew. And in neither of them is there a stable, an innkeeper, a donkey or an ox. It’s right to add things together to make a greater whole, and it’s inevitable that the story is fleshed out and enhanced, not least by references from the prophet Isaiah to the ox and ass knowing it’s master’s crib. But we should take the chance, when we can, to look through the familiar telling of the Christmas story and see what the individual writers say.

As I’ve pointed out, Matthew and Luke, the two Gospel writers who give us the events of the birth of Jesus, approach their telling in very different ways.

Luke gives us Mary's story, Matthew Joseph's. Luke relates to Israel's history of worship: Mary is from a priestly family. Matthew places Jesus firmly in the context of power and authority: Joseph from the family of King David; the visit of wise ones and the upheaval of Herod's kingship and authority. Luke's narrative is shaped around religious and family history, and is centred on the role of mothers. It is for Matthew to focus on men, and on the political, on Governments and international relations. It is Matthew who concentrates on Joseph and his descent from King David, on Herod and his engagement with advisers from other nations.

But it's a real shame that most patterns of Bible reading leave out the very beginning of Matthew – the genealogy, with all those 'begats'. Matthew, in showing Jesus's place in the line of Abraham and King David, includes four women in that line of men. All four women are outsiders in their way. Tamar, eventually wife of Judah, though how she got there was complex. Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho who shelters the Israelite spies and eventually marries one of them. Ruth, grandmother of David, and a Moabite not an Israelite. And Bathsheba, whom David married again through complex means and of which he had to repent.

I love the fact that Jesus's genealogy is complicated. Anyone who has traced their family tree will have turned up some stories which raise their eyebrows. Jesus's ancestry includes outsiders, people who make massive mistakes, people on the edge and people at the heart of power.

Matthew is keen to tell us that Jesus's birth is into a world where things are complicated and messy. Included in Jesus's line are people who held the reins of power and authority, and those who, because of their gender, had no temporal power, yet changed the course of history. Mary is the fifth woman in Matthew's genealogy. Again she has no temporal power, but her place in that line is what we celebrate today, on the fourth Sunday of Advent.

But, do note that it's Joseph on whom Matthew concentrates. Yes, there's an announcement, and yes there has to be obedience. We'll hear of Gabriel and of Mary's response in our nativities and carol services. Today we get Joseph's take. The same story, but from his point of view, and with his own angelic visitation. His obedience is vital in giving Jesus his earthly place. It is Joseph who is descended from David, and it is into that line that Jesus is placed, adopted into the line he began as through him the world was created.

Visitors to our house will spot that I organise our Christmas cards into themes. Already there are two strings of crib scenes. Interestingly they are usually outnumbered by the magi, but not yet this year. I was told recently that one of the most frequently asked questions on courses on medieval art is "who is that woman dressed in blue with the baby?" Mary has been given blue as a colour relatively late in history: she has often had red. But another question is about how you depict Joseph, and it's one which rages in this very Minster.

Go and look at our crib, and ask yourself which of the men is Joseph. I think they are the wrong way round. Joseph is often depicted as older, and the older man in our scene certainly has some exotic clothes.

Matthew invites us to reflect on the great historical story of the descent of Christ from a line he himself began. He asks us to see the birth of Christ in the context of God's love and rescue of his people again and again, often through complex means and through unusual people. And he asks us to reflect on Joseph, aware of his history, obedient to God's call, and willing to risk shame and ridicule from those who did not understand. Mary continues in the story of the life of Christ, and is a witness of his death and resurrection. Joseph disappears from the telling after the family settle in Nazareth. Today we celebrate his obedience along with Mary the God-bearer.

And we, thinking of them both, reflect on Christ, raised up from within a human, family and religious world which is waiting expectantly for God to act. We then should look to our past, to what has shaped us and tell the stories to find the ways of God in dwelling among us. We do this with a history and within our families – however easy or difficult that might be – and where we work and play. And like Joseph and Mary, amazed that God should call them, we should be amazed that God should choose us, and should be filled with courage to do what God asks, in the power of the Spirit, to the glory of God, through Jesus Christ. Amen.