

The Service of Lessons and Carols is, rightly, one of the jewels of our worshipping year. But I have a problem with it. It selects the 'highlights' of the Bible, and gives the headlines of the scriptural story without giving the full picture – like those annoying 'in next week's episode' bits of a crime series that mean you've seen the whole thing and don't need to watch. The events of the Christmas story are much more than a few verses from Luke or Matthew about the Manger, Shepherds and Kings. Let me set you a challenge to go and read again the first two chapters of Luke. I dare you

It is a narrative, an unfolding story, with interweaving themes, context, geography, theology, culture and spirituality. It's a musical actually – there songs we continue to sing today. Which ones...?. It is at once profoundly recognisably human and utterly divine, and places the incarnation, God's taking our flesh and dwelling in our humanity, firmly in a family, regional, political and religious context. Reading it again as I have this week has deepened a sense of mystery and wonder for me about how God works in the world, how God's presence can be discerned, how much more I need to understand, and how we tell our story in our family and context and community.

Luke's narrative is shaped around religious and family history. And it 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 do check out the four women – all outsiders in their way – whom Matthew records before Mary in Jesus's line of descent). Luke gives us Jesus's immediate family context and geography: Elizabeth, descended from the priestly line of Aaron, married to Zechariah, of the priestly line of Abijah, and Mary, to whom she was related. His story is full of echoes of the history of the people of Israel, from out-of-the-ordinary conceptions to the songs sung by women after God's amazing actions had overturned the world order and exalted the poor and weak above the rich and powerful.

Here then is a frame for what is indeed remarkable in these stories: the direct word from God to Zechariah and Mary, the birth of John when Elizabeth was full of years, and the conception of Jesus after the overshadowing of the power of God the most high. How does this happen? Luke's telling does not admit great philosophical speculation or the categorising of miracles. He points though to the God who has been active in this way in the religious history of his people, who has enabled great figures to emerge who have led the nation, prophesied in the name of God, spoken God's word and declared God's praise so that surrounding nations had to take notice as well. From family and local contexts such as Elizabeth and Mary's were raised up David and Samuel, Elijah and Amos, Moses and Joshua. This stuff happens. Expect to be amazed.

Today, the fourth Sunday of Advent focuses on Mary. Sad man that I am, I sort our Christmas cards into themes, and when you come to the Vicarage you'll see at least two strings of crib scenes (though they are outnumbered by the Magi). 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?" There is a wealth of theological writing on the nature of Mary the God bearer, the mother of God, and much study of the place of Mary as a feature of historic and contemporary Christianity. But that kind of analysis is not where Luke's narrative starts or ends either. He shows us a young girl, steeped in her religious history, living it out among a close family who were aware of the way God had worked through their ancestors and were faithfully looking for the fulfilment of promises which were their lifeblood. I love the personal detail in Luke 1: Mary is spoken to from God through Gabriel. What does she do? She doesn't levitate six inches off the floor and radiate sinless perfection as the new anointed of God. She travels – some eighty miles or so – to the person who can help her know what to do next: to her relative Elizabeth, wife and daughter of priests, herself amazingly pregnant.

Elizabeth gives Mary shape and frame and context, and confirms the word: you are to be the mother of your Lord and my Lord. And that makes you pretty special too, says Elizabeth, because have been so blessed by God. It is after this family moment that Mary is able to sing her song of praise, with its ancient scriptural resonances: my soul magnifies the Lord. This act of God is not out of the blue: Christ is raised up from within a human, family and religious world which is waiting expectantly for God to act. I last preached on this passage on the day I preached as St Nic's, four years ago, in their folk communion, and we swapped songs. The Magnificat is a folk song, full of references to the history of the people. A song a mother would sing to a child. In this, ordinary world, the extraordinary God acts.

How do we then speak of this? How do we sing of this? Within our context, anxious to hear and interpret the voice and challenge of God and find a community and family where we can hear that voice in each other and in our shared traditions. We 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 within our families – however easy or difficult that might be – and where we work and play. And like Elizabeth who's unborn baby leapt for joy, and Mary, blessed because she believed, 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, though Jesus Christ. Amen.