

A sermon preached by Dr John Muddiman
3rd Sunday in Advent 2006

Birth and Infancy Narratives

At this time of year primary schools usually put on a nativity play. If it is the same now as when I first went to school, the girls all compete for the part of the Virgin Mary, for failing that they end up as elderly ladies or assorted angels. The boys on the other hand are less than keen to play the part of Joseph. He just hangs around with nothing much to do, like most expectant fathers. Nor do they particularly want to play Gabriel - the wings and the tinsel halo look a bit sissy. No, the serious competition is for the part of King Herod. That is something you can get your teeth into. It is allotted to the boy who can look sly and menacing and roll his eyes in a fit of rage as he commands the slaughter of the innocents. Consolation prizes are the magi or the bad-tempered inn-keeper, otherwise you end up as assorted shepherds.

The problem with nativity plays, as every school-teacher director knows is that it is practically impossible to weld together Matthew's version with Luke's , because Matthew's is all blood and thunder and Luke's is all sweetness and light. For some kind of coherent plot one has to read the gospels separately. I will try to do that for you briefly this morning. At greater length and with immense erudition I recommend Fr Raymond Brown's book of 1977 entitled *The Birth of the Messiah*¹.

Matthew's story is controlled by his concern to demonstrate that Jesus was the true Messiah prophesied in scripture. He does this by tracing his family tree

¹ London: Chapman. See also Raymond Brown's short but brilliant discussion of our topic in *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*; London: Chapman 1973.

back to David and ultimately to Abraham, by recounting the events of Jesus' birth in David's royal city of Bethlehem and by showing how threatened King Herod felt by the rumour that a young pretender had just been born. (One should remember that Herod's title to the throne of Israel had no basis whatsoever; he was not even a Jew let alone David's heir.) Sprinkled liberally though Matthew's account are proof texts from scripture to back up his claims for birth in Bethlehem, birth from a Virgin, the exile in Egypt and eventual residence in Nazareth and so forth; and there are larger typological correspondences too, especially parallels with the birth of Moses.

Some aspects of this story are perfectly plausible. For instance that a law-abiding Jew like Joseph would react to *prima facie* evidence of his future wife's adultery by opting for a quiet divorce, or that the King of the Jews would authorize a little local massacre to keep a firm grip on his Kingdom. Herod the Great did after all have a few of his own sons executed for the same reason.

But there are several historical problems as well. Matthew's genealogy is at loggerheads with the one we find in Luke²: it derives Jesus from David via Solomon, while Luke traces descent through Nathan, and has more and different names thereafter³. A possible solution to this problem is that Matthew has simply adopted an official royal family tree and added the names of Joseph and Jesus to it, while Luke has done a bit more research and is saying that while Jesus belonged to the House of David, he was not, as it were, first in line to the throne.

² Luke 3:23-38 – somewhat surprisingly not within the infancy story: see below for the view that Luke 3 was originally the beginning of the Gospel.

³ 41 as opposed to 26 names, and not even Joseph's father has the same name in both lists!

Or again, Matthew has Joseph and his bride as residents of Bethlehem who then emigrate to Nazareth to avoid persecution, but Luke has them just visiting Bethlehem to register in a Roman tax census, but unfortunately, again from the historical point of view, Luke's census is at least ten years too late to coincide with the birth of Jesus.

And then there is the wandering star. Some modern astronomers, like their predecessors the Magi, have tried to be helpful by making various suggestions about comets, or conjunctions of planets or meteorite storms; but Matthew's star is more likely to be a scriptural than an astronomical phenomenon. I suppose the main historical question that the Christian reader wants to ask is this: Was He really born of a Virgin? Since Luke's gospel makes the same claim, albeit in a different form, I will come back to that question later.

To summarise,

It is possible that Matthew freely composed his birth story as a preface to the Gospel on the basis of just a few remembered fragments of Christian tradition with the aim of demonstrating that Jesus was indeed the Jewish Messiah of Israel's expectation. But as John Barton pointed out two weeks ago, in the very act of fulfilling those prophecies Jesus also subverted them – he was not what you would expect, except when you began to think about it and about the God whose faithful servant and son he was, and then at last you see the point, that the Kingdom of Heaven is not like the Kingdoms of this world, based on greed and violence but a Kingdom based on love and forgiveness, on non-retaliation and redemptive suffering. In other words one needs to read Matthew's birth story in the light of the Sermon on the Mount and his account of Jesus' Passion.

As we turn to Luke's infancy story, there is much less of a consensus among the scholars. Some argue that informants close to Mary herself supplied the Evangelist with his information; others that almost all of it is the work of Luke's own literary and theological imagination; and there are several mediating positions in between. I will just give you one option derived from the book by Fr Brown that I mentioned earlier.

Luke's Gospel seems to begin over again in chapter three - the part we are currently reading in the lectionary - with the account of Jesus' public ministry beginning with his baptism. It is possible, then, that chapters one and two were added later as an afterthought.⁴

Within the first two chapters we can detect four basic components: an annunciation to Zechariah and the birth of John; an annunciation to Mary and a longer account of the birth and circumcision of Jesus; three hymns the *Magnificat* the *Benedictus* and the *Nunc Dimittis* and finally a story about Jesus in the Temple at the age of 12. I will offer a brief comment on each of these in reverse order. Luke may have derived the incident in the Temple from a longer book concerned with Jesus' childhood and adolescence; such books can still be found in the so-called New Testament Apocrypha⁵. If so, he has done well to select just one story and one that avoids the flights of fancy and gratuitous miracle that characterize the apocryphal gospels. Anyone who has ever lost a child in the rush of

⁴ There is enough similarity in terms of broad themes between these two chapters and the rest of the Gospel and especially with its second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, for us to suppose that the same author is responsible for them, - themes such as concern for the poor, the significance of the role of women, the spiritual gifts of praise, prayer and contemplation, John as the forerunner of Jesus and the Holy Spirit and angelic messengers guiding the course of salvation-history.

⁵ E.g. The Protevangelium of James and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, see The New Testament Apocrypha ed. W.Schneemelcher, Westminster: John Knox Press 1991.

Christmas shopping will sympathise with the realism of this scene and share the anxiety of Jesus' parents in contrast to their son's carefree confidence.

Secondly, the Canticles may have reached Luke as hymns already used in worship by early Jewish Christian communities; for they are heavily dependent on themes and actual phrases drawn from the Jewish scriptures. If so, he has simply adapted them to fit into their new contexts. To anyone who finds it upsetting to think that Mary may not have composed the *Magnificat* herself, I would say two things. First, that this whole subject is highly contentious and many different views are permissible. But second, if it is true, then Luke has decided to place the church's hymnody not only on the lips of elderly priests and prophets as we might have expected, but also on the lips of a young woman, probably no more than thirteen years of age, because he saw her as an appropriate spokesperson and symbol for the Church as a whole, which is indeed the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on this matter and of the most recent ARCIC agreed statement on Mary.⁶

The other two components of the Lucan infancy narrative could have come from two separate sources, one from the circle of the disciples of John the Baptist, the other from Christian circles. But it is perhaps slightly more likely, since they are so closely parallel, that he modelled one on the other. The dependence could go either way, but personally I think the story of the birth of John the Baptist has been derived from the Christian story. The opening scene of Zechariah in the Temple would then correspond to the later scene of Mary and Joseph in the Temple; Zechariah being struck dumb would be a nice irony for one whose son

⁶ *Mary Grace and hope in Christ* London: Morehouse 2005.

was to be known as “the voice crying in the wilderness”. Above all, the wondrous birth from aged and barren parents, reminding the reader, as it does, of the births of the patriarch Isaac and the prophet Samuel is then surpassed by an even more wondrous birth from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. In this as in other matters John the Baptist paves the way for the “one who is to come who is greater than he”.

On this showing, the heart of the Lucan birth story would be the annunciation to Mary and the angels’ message to the shepherds that brings them to a stable and a child born in poverty and cradled in a manger. Is this historically plausible? That depends on whether you agree that sometimes the young and devout can be granted extraordinary moments of religious exaltation, or that the poor sleeping out in the cold can sometimes be granted a vision of God’s glory and a longing for peace in the world. The sequel to Jesus’ birth in Luke is his circumcision, the sacrifice of redemption for the first born and the purification of Mary after childbirth. These have been run together in a single dramatic incident but it is not implausible from a historical perspective.⁷

But what of the Virginal Conception, which is one of the very few points of agreement between Luke and Matthew, and the point at which these texts are called upon, not just to decorate Christmas, but to support a doctrine of the Creed? Not everything in the Creed has the same status or character. “He Descended into Hell” for example is pretty clearly a metaphorical expression. Some Christians, sincerely concerned for Jesus’ oneness with us according to his

⁷ The early Church would probably not have invented such a very traditionally Jewish scene. By Luke’s day male Gentile members of the Church were not required to be circumcised, which may be why the otherwise more Jewish evangelist Matthew omits to mention Jesus’ circumcision.

full humanity, may wish to say the same about the Virginal Conception. However, it is not so easy to explain away a tradition that Matthew presents as the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy that "a virgin shall conceive" but which Luke presents very differently as a going above and beyond a belated birth from elderly parents. I will just quote, if I may, the recent ARCIC statement that I mentioned before, because, without denying its historical basis, it helpfully points us towards the religious meaning of the doctrine.

"The virginal conception may appear in the first place as an absence, i.e. the absence of a human father. It is in reality, however, a sign of the presence and work of the Spirit. Belief in the virginal conception is an early Christian tradition adopted and developed independently by Matthew and Luke.⁸ For Christian believers, it is an eloquent sign of the divine sonship of Christ and of new life through the Spirit. The virginal conception also points to the new birth of every Christian, as an adopted child of God. Each is "born again (from above) by water and the Spirit" (John 3:3-5). Seen in this light, the virginal conception, far from being an isolated miracle, is a powerful expression of what the Church believes about her Lord, and about our salvation."

I do not want to end with doctrine but with worship, which is why we are here this morning. For there is another interesting similarity between Matthew and Luke's very different birth stories. At their centre in each case is a moment of quiet reverence. The Magi kneel to offer their gifts; the shepherds come to gaze in

⁸ Given its strongly Jewish matrix in both Matthean and Lucan versions, an appeal to analogies with pagan mythology or to an exaltation of virginity over the married state to explain the origin of the tradition is implausible. Nor is the idea of virginal conception likely to derive from an over-literal reading of the Greek text of Isaiah 7:14 (LXX), for that is not the way the idea is introduced in the Lucan account. Moreover, the suggestion that it originated as an answer to the accusation of illegitimacy levelled at Jesus is unlikely, as that accusation could equally have arisen because it was known that there was something unusual about Jesus' birth (cf. Mark 6:3; John 8:41) and because of the Church's claim about his virginal conception.

wonder at the child in the manger. These figures are very familiar from the Christmas Crib that we will bless next week and say our prayers before. Although, as I have tried to explain, it is very difficult to create a convincing composite of the two infancy narratives, here they seem to be saying the same thing in a perfectly complementary way.⁹ The humbled rich are on one side of the crib, and the exalted poor on the other; they are often presented as of different ages, young, middling and old, and in the case of the kings of different races, black, brown and white, so that in effect the whole of humanity kneels here in adoration before their true Sovereign, the Babe of Bethlehem, who rules in the name of Love.

⁹ See further Fr David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination*, OUP:1999.