

God's desire

a sermon preached on the

fourth sunday of advent

18 December 2016

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by the reverend helen creed

the lections: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

One of the Melbourne traditions in the lead up to Christmas is a visit to the Myer windows. This year they are based on a picture story book by a local author, set in St Kilda in the 1960s – with lots of visual references to that time – including a mum sitting on the back step shelling peas, the “giggle palace” at Luna Park, the hills hoist in the back-yard. If you want to make a nostalgic pilgrimage to the 60s, then the Myer windows are for you!

But there is something else displayed in Melbourne this year – maybe it has been there before, but this is the first year I have seen it: it is our gospel reading for today – Matthew chapter 1, verses 18 – 25. It's on the corner of Swanston and Collins streets – on the very edge of what used to be the city square. I don't know if any of you have noticed the large water wall which faces Collins street there – well, our lectionary for today is on the back of that water wall – it forms a wall itself, that would be 6 metres long and 3 metres high – the words of verses 18 to 25 are in big silver capital letters, starting with “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.” – and it's been put there by the Melbourne city Council.

The day that I saw it, I'd have to say there wasn't a lot of interest in it, not many pilgrims: there were a couple of security guards having a bit of a chin-wag at one corner, and – there were quite a few people on the other side – where the water wall is [they were picking up leaves and making letters out of them on the water wall (the leaves just sort of stick there) – with the letters spelling out the word Christmas]. And there was me, taking photos.

There is a strong contrast between the Myer windows, which are full of detail and movement and visual delight, and the Matthew wall, which is solid, solemn, and not immediately entertaining. Still the elements of Matthew's story, surely take us into a world that makes the Myer windows look quite prosaic!

It's a story which hangs on a dream, and resolve that forms in Joseph as a result of that dream;

A story that holds the words of ‘an angel of the Lord’;

A story that recalls the words of an ancient prophet.

And it's a story that goes on, in the next section of Matthew, to tell of fear and violence and a decision to flee far from home.

It's also a story that has an emphatic theological point to make:

First the narrator tells us: “before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit”.

Then the angel says to Joseph: “the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit”.

A bit after that there are the words of the prophet: “the virgin shall conceive and bear a son”.

And then finally back to the narrator: “he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her . . .”

As we spend some time with Matthew’s account this morning, let us start by noticing that his concern is to explore the *meaning* of this event, not to answer any questions we might have about how Jesus ended up in the womb of Mary. And let us put aside any notion we might have that the early Christians were so much more naïve than us, in their grasp of the mystery of the birth of Jesus. In other words, let’s take these verses seriously as words worth putting up in the city of Melbourne: not because they are some sort of quaint cultural artefact, but because they are insight for us now.

The angel of the Lord appears to Joseph at a very important point in the narrative. With the discovery of Mary’s pregnancy, Joseph is poised: ready to release Mary from her betrothal to him, rather than demand the full penalty of the Law, which is brutal:

Here’s the relevant quote from Deuteronomy:

“If, however, this charge is true, that evidence of the young woman’s virginity was not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father’s house and the men of the town shall stone her to death . . .”

“ . . . do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife”, the just-in-time-angel says to Joseph, “for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit”.

As we explore the meaning of this challenging statement, it’s probably worth saying what it doesn’t mean first.

It doesn’t mean that the Holy Spirit was Mary’s sexual partner. And it’s not like the ancient Greek legend of Zeus – whose liaison with a mortal woman brought about the life of the half-god, Hercules.

I also think it’s fairly easy to get caught up in all the ways that the birth of Jesus is like our different experiences of the birth of children close to us – and in particular the hope and promise those pregnancies and babies bring.

But Christmas is not a celebration of babies, and it’s not a celebration of family and it’s not a celebration of the way that children bless our lives – good as all those things are, and so worth celebrating.

What Matthew is at pains to express, is that the “conception” of Jesus in the womb of Mary, is not the beginning of his life. We did not exist before those first cells divided and formed what science now calls a blastocyst. But Jesus did. That’s the point. To use John’s image about this: “In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” And it is the action of the Holy Spirit, not the action of any human being, which brings all the immensity of eternity into the very womb of Mary.

So “conceived by the Holy Spirit” is about God’s desire to be involved with his creation **in an entirely new way**. Not involved with us through laws or through the words of prophets, or by the actions of judges and kings . . . but involved by taking on the life of a human creature, a life that necessarily involves being carried in a womb, being helpless and dependent and confused and frightened and hungry, as well as, hopefully, a life that involves experiencing the humble love of other human beings.

The words from Isaiah which are part of Matthew’s story were originally addressed to King Ahaz of Judah. Our OT reading gives us the context for these words. Ahaz is being bullied by the King of

Assyria, Isaiah has been offering him counsel, but Ahaz feels so defeated and abandoned, that he is now refusing to listen to Isaiah and Isaiah is annoyed. Indeed, Ahaz is so convinced that God will not help Judah against the nasty Assyrians, that he won't even ask for a sign anymore: a sign that God will act for Judah's welfare at some point; that God has not abandoned his people. It is in this context that Isaiah prophesies that God will send a sign anyway, regardless of the King's negativity. It will be a sign given freely by God, a sign that will reflect God's faithfulness to his people, even when they have given up on him.

So these words that Matthew quotes: "Look the *young woman* shall conceive and bear a son . . ." when they were first spoken were most likely referring to King Ahaz's wife and the birth of a son who, in his adult years, would restore the land of Israel and maintain the line of David.

But the early church saw much in these words that fitted with their experience of Jesus: he is the one sent freely **by God, to assure us of God's emphatic commitment to our welfare; he is the sign God offers even when we have given up on God's promises.**

At the heart of Matthew's nativity story, is his vision of a God who does new things, things beyond any human imagining. These new things may be beyond our capacity to understand, but that doesn't mean they are not true.

There is a kind of poem attributed to Teresa of Avila you will have heard – that God has "No hands, no feet on earth but yours" etc, and I know these words have a place and a wisdom, but I also think that poem can lead us to a pretty poor vision of God. Matthew, on the other hand, offers us a vision of a God of great responsiveness and creativity; a God who is not constrained by our resistance to life in all its forms, a God who is resolved to give us every chance of being caught up in all the beauty and potentiality of being human. This is the God who is delighted when we use our hands and feet and eyes for good, but who does not depend on any of us doing that in order to send us a sign of love, in the birth of Christ.

Now, I've just been saying that God's saving intervention into the life of humankind did not depend on the imagination, expectation or capacity of any human being. But it did, of course, depend upon Mary's willingness to carry the eternal one within her womb, and to nurture her new-born baby. And it did also depend on Joseph's decision to protect Mary from being stoned to death. We would do well in these last days before Christmas, to ponder Mary's "let it be with me according to your word", and Joseph's willingness to "do what the angel commanded him". Neither saw themselves as heroes, but both were emboldened by the words of angels, both were willing to step into a most uncertain future, both found life by taking the risk of trusting God. Amen