

Dear friends,

Blessed Advent to you. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. St. Giles is offering ONE service, at 4:30 pm. It will be a liturgy of Lessons and Carols. Please join us on ZOOM tomorrow (link at St. Giles website), musicians and readers from the congregation will help to lead our worship.

I want to spend a little time and space here to talk about the part of the “Christmas story” we won’t be hearing this year. The first two chapters of Matthew’s gospel have unique material that Christians have woven together with portions of the first two chapters of Luke (some of which we will read tomorrow) to form what we think of as the account of the birth of Jesus. Before I turn to that, let me remind us all of some things that are true about both Matthew’s and Luke’s material.

The first thing to say is that each evangelist used the opening of their gospels (MT chapters 1-2, LK chapters 1-2) to give an account of the birth of Jesus, but to do it in a way that introduces all the major themes and emphasizes of the subsequent account of Jesus’ ministry and Passion.

Although they both wrote about the birth of Jesus, Matthew and Luke did not know each other’s work, and in many ways they were emphasizing different things in their respective accounts. However, there are enough points of commonality to make it clear that there was a certain body of tradition, historical fact, and prayerful reflection about the birth of Jesus that both Matthew and Luke could draw from. Some obvious examples are the names of Jesus’s parents (Mary and Joseph) who are betrothed, but not married; Joseph is of the house of David; there was an angelic announcement of Jesus’ birth; there is an angelic directive to name the child Jesus; the child is born in Bethlehem, during the reign of Herod the Great, and raised in Nazareth; the conception of the child is not through human sexual intercourse, and there are several other points as well. In short, there was a general awareness of some basic “background” about Jesus, as we might say today.

So, sharing this information in common about Jesus, what do the evangelists develop and enlarge upon from their cultural and religious tradition and experience to create their respective accounts of the birth of the Messiah? As we’ve been hearing these last weeks, and will delve into more deeply tomorrow,

Luke's focus is on Mary, and her relationship with her relative Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. In addition, as we will see, Luke is deeply concerned to express the depth of God's commitment to a new order of things in which justice is done, mercy is given, and holiness is expressed in living. For Luke, this will be brought to a sharp focus on the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist at the opening of the adult ministry.

One last thing before I take up Matthew's birth narrative—sorting out what is in Luke from what is in Matthew.

The angelic host singing "Gloria", the annunciation to the Shepherds, the "stable" are only in Luke. The star, the Magi, the slaughter of the Innocents are only in Matthew.

Our Christmas crèche, and myriad pageants, are actually a medieval legacy from St. Francis, they are the fruit of combining elements from the two gospels. This does not make our Christmas displays and tableaux untrue. It means that, over time, our prayerful reflection on the texts and traditions has developed a synthesis that has its own strength and power for expressing the gospel message to our sinful and broken world, and that to use it most effectively, we need to understand the original and distinct elements which have been blended.

Matthew opens his gospel with a genealogy. This unprepossessing start from a modern viewpoint has an almost painfully long list of names which holds no obvious interest. Many of those listed are utterly obscure and unknown to us in any way save their place in the genealogy, but does ground the work of God in Christ in God's activity throughout the history of Israel and the world.

Down through the centuries commentators have tried to figure out what Matthew had in mind. The vast majority of commentators, for centuries, have thought one of the most important, and enigmatic, elements in the genealogy in Matthew is the inclusion of four particular women in the list. These women were God's "enterprising agents", in the words of Raymond Brown, and in so being, they advanced God's purposes even in circumstances regarded then by social norms as irregular, not to say morally, dubious. This helps to open the understanding of the evangelists' audiences in appreciating what God and Mary were doing in a circumstance that was, to the human eye, irregular.

An excellent discussion of this entire subject is in a little book titled, "A Coming Christ at Advent" (1986) by Raymond Brown. He makes two observations which I find especially encouraging in the present time. First, God sometimes uses unlikely and unprepossessing people to further divine purposes; second, God works through human institutions that are sometimes led by, corrupt, oppressive, venal, and stupid people. Brown reminds us that King David, great warrior and sublime poet, was also a murderous adulterer, and that Jacob was a trickster and defrauder who cheated his older brother Esau out of his rightful inheritance. On the institutional side, Brown does not hesitate to point out the violent, abusive, corrupt leadership in the secular realm (and in the Church).

Brown wrote, long before present day scandals and concerns, about any government or church:

"We must recognize that in acting in Jesus Christ God is consistent with His action in Abraham and David, in the patriarchs, in the kings, in the unknown. But that is only one aspect of the story of Jesus Christ, a story that has a sequence as well as a beginning; and the on-going aspects are what makes the genealogy 'good news' for Matthew's audience and for us. If the beginning of the story involved as many sinners as saints, so does the sequence...sinners and saints among those who would bear his name down through the ages...(who) have been empowered to preserve, proclaim, and convey the salvation brought by Jesus Christ...The God who wrote the beginning with crooked lines also writes the sequence with crooked lines, and some of those lines are our own lives and witness...the message of the genealogy is an enabling invitation... the genealogy has also taught us that God did not hesitate to entrust...an essential role in the story of his son's origins (to) an authoritative, and at times authoritarian, institution led by corrupt, venal, stupid, and ineffective leaders...Those "Christians" who proclaim that they believe in and love Jesus but cannot accept the church and the institution because it is far from perfect and sometimes a scandal have not understood the beginning of the story and consequently are not ready to face the challenge of the sequence...a meditation on "the story of the origin of Jesus Christ"...is not a discouragement but an encouragement...Jesus called Peter and Paul, Paul called Timothy, someone called you, you must call someone else." (pp25-26).

Brown's reference above to 'God writing with crooked lines' comes from a variously attributed saying, "God writes straight with crooked lines". I honestly cannot nail down the quote, which may not actually have a known author. It is not an uncommon saying in this form, and it has echoes in folk wisdom known to Shakespeare, for example, who included this version in Hamlet, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them though we will" (Hamlet, V,ii).