

Isaiah 63. 7-9

Psalm 8

Galatians 4. 4-7

Matthew 2. 13-23

I had been a few years in ministry and in the lead up to Christmas we had been running some Advent workshops and Christmas events for local families. These were well patronised and there were some warm connections made between the congregation and these families. They seemed so very grateful for what we were doing and delighted to be participating. As we staged some nativity scenes, which included just about everything from the nativity stories – holy family, angels, shepherds, wise men and other bit players - I realised what a mash our understanding of what Matthew's and Luke's two nativities had become; two quite different accounts of the birth had been homogenised into one, and that while the two mashed together stories provide opportunity for more parts for children in Christmas plays, it seemed to me to do some violence to the distinctiveness of what Matthew and Luke were each separately trying to say about the incarnation of God in the Christ child.

So, I decided to produce the little booklet *Stories of the Birth of Jesus* which includes extracts from the beginning of each of the four gospels, highlighting the way in which each of these Gospel writers were trying to paint a picture of what it means to say that Jesus is the Son of God. Each of them in their own way give us a narrative about how Jesus came to be Son of God.

The thing about mashing the two nativity accounts of Matthew and Luke into one story carries with it a kind of assumption that each of them record actual events which happened around the birth. Our temptation is to think: well, neither Matthew nor Luke knew all the bits, so each gospel is incomplete. Matthew knew about dreams and magi and murderous Herod and flights to Egypt and return to Israel. And Luke knew about Elizabeth and Zechariah and Simeon and Anna and visits by angels and shepherds. And the best thing is to put all the bits together into one, homogenised whole. Telling the whole story. This tendency to pad out the content of our nativity plays has been unhelpful for us in understanding the distinctiveness of what Matthew and Luke each has to say.

My own unexamined assumption that the gospels were actual eyewitness accounts – a kind of history - was challenged one year when I found myself preaching on Jesus' testing in the wilderness. We are told in each of the gospels that the tempter comes to Jesus and tests him, asking him three questions, each of which are prefaced with the proviso: *if you are the son of God ...?* The tempter, as Matthew calls him, invites Jesus to hanker after some kind of miraculous intervention by God to protect or give him power. I recall my own confusion about whether this testing in the wilderness was an eyewitness account or something else, because I began to wonder: how did this get recorded, written down, remembered. Was it that someone was hovering with a notebook or an iPhone and recording what transpired between Jesus and the devil? Well, no. Maybe Jesus did talk with the disciples about what he experienced in some kind of wilderness testing, real or metaphoric. But, I had to admit my own tendency to a kind of literalism about the account.

So then I began to recognise that given this testing in the desert for 40 days seemed to echo Israel's testing in the desert for 40 years, maybe the symbolic nature of the testing was more important than whether the actual event had taken place as it is recorded. I recognised my

lurking assumption that the wilderness testing was an eyewitness account arising from an unexamined belief that the Bible is literally true; recorded fact; the inerrant word of God; some kind of unquestionable history. I found I was provoked to use my imagination more about this story, probe the story about what it had to say about Jesus as Son of God, look for echoes of the Jewish story in what the gospel writers were saying and consider what its author was trying to get at. It was not enough to simply read the account off the page. I found I had to take responsibility for my own questions as they arose in relation to the text. And realise that the Bible wouldn't break if I asked questions about it. And God wouldn't get quite irate either.

Which brings us to the task of probing today's Gospel: Joseph's dreams, the flight to Egypt, the murderous Herod and the return from Egypt and settlement in Nazareth.

Matthew's Gospel is written for a community of Jewish followers of the way of Jesus; people who were steeped in, and shaped by, their Jewish heritage - but had come to a radically renewed understanding about the nature of God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. They had come to understand Jesus to be the Messiah, God with Us – albeit a very different one from a conquering political and military figure most had looked for. In the Hebrew scriptures there is a theme which longs for, looks to this kind of saviour. But Matthew's community had come to understand that there is another model of saviour, hiding in plain sight in the scriptures, but overlooked – one the prophet Isaiah describes as the suffering servant. Why was it so hard for them to see this? I suppose, because we all want an all-powerful, charismatic, conquering one, someone who will fix it all; not a lowly born, lone, broken, crucified and rejected saviour. But the key to understanding the picture of Matthew's Messiah is the thread of fulfillment which runs right through Matthew's gospel; three times noted in today's gospel:

This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah;

There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled,

This fulfilling that Jesus embodies is central to Matthew. And maybe the central pivot of this fulfilling is a saying given during the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.' Maybe these few words are the key to Matthew's understanding of Jesus. That he is truly Jewish, that he didn't come to start a new religion, to do away with Judaism, to supersede it, update God to a new version. The key to reading Matthew is this notion of fulfillment, of completion.

So, the flow of the event in today's reading: the flight to Egypt, the murder of infants and the return of the holy family to Israel is an echo of the Moses story; a coming to completion of the Moses story and his giving of the law. If you remember, the flow of the Moses story is the calling of the slaves to freedom, their becoming a holy people and the giving of the law to guide and shape their life together. Matthew in his gospel paints a picture where the Jesus story is an echo and fulfillment of the Moses story. And as Jesus is called the name Son of God, so Israel is called throughout the Hebrew scriptures Son of God; Israel my chosen.

In the Moses story – long before Moses is born - Joseph the dreamer, of the technicolour dream coat, son of Jacob – later named as Israel – finds his way to Egypt and becomes the means of the twelve children of Jacob being saved from a terrible famine. Likewise, Joseph, husband of Mary, dreams and finds his way to Egypt, fleeing cruelty and death.

As the infant Moses is threatened by the murderous pharaoh – who kills all of the male children born to the Hebrew slaves, so the false king of the Jews, Herod – who historically had a reputation for terrible cruelty and a chaotic reign – orders the massacre of the male children under two.

As Israel is called out of Egypt into freedom so Jesus is called out of Egypt to be bearer of the freedom of God.

As we know, though, from the travels through the wilderness for 40 years that the fleeing slaves were restless, discontent, rebellious; testing Moses, testing God. Jesus is tested in the wilderness for forty days and resists the temptations put to him by the tempter and is found to be beloved son. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures there is a tension between Israel as chosen one and yet, their rebelliousness and fleeing from God. Isaiah the prophet gives voice to God's grief over this rebelliousness. Often Israel is likened to the vineyard of God:

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!

Matthew portrays Jesus as the obedient son; the one who is able to fulfill the spirit of the law; The law which, Israel, the son was not able to fulfill.

As we read through Matthew this year we will come against this interplay and tension repeatedly. As we read though we can be tempted to read with a sense that Israel has been superseded in the favours of God. Tragically the gospel of Matthew has been read like this as a kind of antisemitic polemic, with terrible consequences against the Jews. All that is for another day though.

Matthew seeks to move his readers from looking for a political Messiah to a very personal story. Unlike most histories of great men, which track a path from humble birth to political greatness, the gospels track a path from shameful birth to apparent failure. Yet, proclaim that *this* is God with us. It invites us to ponder the personal, the intimacy of the coming of God, the transforming and upending of our usual ways of doing things in order to look for God in the humble, the broken, the overlooked. The pattern we are invited into, to look for God in these places of humility, brokenness, apparent failure does, though, have political implications. It is a way of transforming the polis, the city, healing the polis, renewing the polis and continuing to reveal God with us. This is the pattern we are called to; the way we are called to walk in the pattern of Jesus. And so God in Christ continues to be seen and heard and experienced and the liberating power of the kingdom of heaven be enjoyed.

As our year unfolds, may God give us grace and courage to continue in this way.

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