

Sunday Evening 16th December 2012- Kenneth Gray, Matthew 1:18-25 "Faith and doubt"

Matthew's gospel tells us much less about the events surrounding the birth of Jesus than it tells us about the crucifixion. This is in contrast to how the two festivals of Christmas and Easter are celebrated in our day. Christmas is a season of numerous children's events and special services in the modern church, so much so that ministers are often hard pressed to find space to fit in a sermon of typical length that does justice to the 'unpicking' of the message of Christ's incarnation.

Society is generally indulgent towards the Christmas story and has turned it into a warm, glowing, storybook event about a tiny baby in a manger. In this passage from Matthew there is no such sentimental glow. Rather, we find Joseph confronting an unwelcome truth and examining his options in face of Mary's pregnancy. He intends to divorce her quietly and move on with his life.

Interestingly it's different for Mary. She had been visited by the angel in person – Joseph receives his message in a dream. Although she herself seems to have told Joseph nothing, she has, typically of her sex, poured out her news to another woman, Elizabeth. Perhaps she didn't know how to tell Joseph. Maybe she felt he would never believe her. But now 'she was found to be with child'.

Matthew describes Joseph's dilemma in a few words but we can almost hear his thoughts weighing up his options. Should he simply ignore the problem and carry on as if nothing is wrong? This would be a surprisingly common reaction – illegitimacy is as old as time. Should he go public and shame Mary? Again, not an uncommon reaction even today – the stuff of many a TV exposé show. He chooses a middle option – he will put Mary and her child away from him as quietly as possible. He is clearly a compassionate man who loves Mary and does not wish to subject her to public ridicule.

Like many a human being Joseph, having struggled to consider his problem from every angle, obtains a certain peace of mind when he has reached his decision and he is able to fall asleep. Kenneth commented that if he had had Joseph's dream he doubted whether he would have believed the angel. The natural human action would be to say that one cannot build a life on dreams of that sort. If Joseph had been different, if he had been less open to God's prompting, he would not have believed the dream either.

So this passage now leads us to consider whether miracles can be understood in this modern, practical world of ours. The retelling of the Nativity is an occasion when we tend to focus on all the practical, even mundane elements of the story. We talk about the pregnancy, the journey, the census, the inn being full up, the stable, the shepherds, the manger even the swaddling clothes. Society is comfortable with such details and can relate to them. But the Christmas story is made up of miracle after miracle- miracles of timing, place, a guiding star, angelic voices proclaiming the Good News, the magi warned in a dream to avoid telling Herod.

Here, as Joseph is given the angel's message, he too is caught up in the miraculous. Joseph has a choice to make – to believe or to disbelieve.

Confronted by the Gospel's claims we too must choose. Whether we are aware of it or not we too are frequently in that place where Joseph found himself. God asks us 'Will you take that risk for me? Will you believe me and trust in me?' How many of us awake from the dream and dismiss the message as fanciful? Yet we sometimes ask 'Why doesn't God intervene in my life?' He does- but we ignore him or explain away that which points towards the miraculous.

We live in strange times. The most beautiful name 'Jesus' is more often spoken nowadays as a swearword than a term of reverence. In Joseph's time Jesus was a popular name - the same as Joshua- meaning the Saviour.

The virgin birth is the subject of great theological debate in the Church. Some say they don't believe in the virgin birth because it is a miracle and they don't believe in miracles. Others dislike the idea that Jesus's birth was different from others' births. But the gospel writers emphasise the virginity of Mary as a biblical truth. The word for virgin "almah" prophesied in Isaiah can mean 'virgin' or 'young girl'. However the Greek

word in the gospels, “parthenos”, only means ‘virgin’.

The Scriptures are either true or untrue on this point. If God's word is untrue on the virginity of Mary how could we trust his word on other statements such as ‘I will be with you always’ or ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life’? Like so many theological debates, the virgin birth debate is a satanic attack on our confidence in the truth of the Word of God.

Joseph trusts in God's message sent through the angel in his dream. He gives the baby the name ‘Jesus’ and the prophesy is fulfilled.

When people ask what Christmas is all about our answer should be **‘Christmas is about salvation – the gift of a saviour’**. That's what we should be focusing on during the Christmas season.