

Trinity 2

Sunday 21st June 2020

Five Events that Shaped Christianity – Week 2

Event 1. Christmas – The Birth



The Nativity, Federico Barrocci

Readings:

Isaiah 7:14-17

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.'

Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Reflection

Though I have personalised them, most of the ideas here are from John Pritchard's book on the 5 Events which made Christianity. As I explained in last week's introduction, each of these reflections will be divided into 3 sections.

What happened?

Christmas is probably an event that everyone, Christian or not, is very familiar with; everyone thinks they know what happened. But the real event has been overlaid with sentimental and commercial accretions and if we want to understand it, we need to strip those away.

There are actually two accounts of the nativity, given to us by Matthew and Luke, which are very different, but we have conflated them into one story. Matthew tells us of Joseph's dream and gives us the story of the magi; Luke focusses on the annunciation to Mary, the journey to Bethlehem and the angels' proclamation to the shepherds. There are other differences and some confusion about time scale. There is also some debate about where home was for Mary and Joseph, but both evangelists say categorically that the birth took place in Bethlehem. The church has also always emphatically stated that this was a virgin birth, but as we see from the Isaiah reading, the correct translation of the prophecy does not refer to a virgin but says that a young woman will give birth. I know some people find that virgin birth difficult to accept, but what is crucial is that both writers are unequivocally united about the divinity of Christ. And that – the incarnate God - is the absolutely indisputable bedrock of our faith.

What does it mean?

It means first that we now know what God is like. Humanity needed to understand God. God needed to make himself understood by human beings. The Law, earthly kings and prophets failed to give us a comprehensible picture of God. His answer was Jesus. However, God is not limited to that single personhood. But in the incarnation he gives us the ultimate demonstration of divinity and uses the human form so that we can more easily relate to him.

We know, too, from the incarnation, that God is with us, on our side because Jesus has shown us what God's love for us is like. And because of that we have a clearer understanding of what it is to be truly human. The incarnation is a statement of our value as human beings. And contrary to the belief of some heretics like the Gnostics who only valued the spiritual, the birth of Jesus shows us that the material world matters. God has honoured the world by inhabiting and embracing it so nothing in future can be entirely "secular." Spiritual and material are both important for us as Christians.

What does it mean for us now?

It shows us that Christmas is the feast of the outsider exemplified by the marginalised shepherds and the foreign wise men. And outsiders should take pride of place at our Christmas, too. God is radically with us so we need to be with others; our response to God's commitment to us should be our commitment to our neighbours.

When I wrote about the Trinity, I said that we need to accept paradox. And the nativity is yet another paradox; a baby who is at once human and divine, omnipotent and vulnerable. It confounds our tendency to reduce God to platitudes and "manageability" – and gives us permission to show paradox and vulnerability in our own discipleship and so gives us space to grow without that compulsion to perfectionism which daunts so many of us.

Perhaps the most encouraging message of the nativity is that we are never alone. Of course, we were not alone before, but Christ's coming assured us for all time that we are graced with the presence of God.

But there is a lesson too. Jesus did not remain that tiny baby in the manger – he grew up and so must we. Christmas is a nostalgia industry about this appealing baby and often glosses over the fact that when he grew up, he travelled to the cross. We must move out of our first stage faith, our babyhood, if we are to serve the world, and like him, embrace the way of the cross. Amen

Prayers

Today's Collect

Lord, you have taught us
that all our doings without love are nothing worth:
send your Holy Spirit
and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love,
the true bond of peace and of all virtues,
without which whoever lives is counted dead before you.
Grant this for your only Son Jesus Christ's sake,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen

A Prayer in thanksgiving for the Nativity

Lord Jesus Christ,
your birth at Bethlehem
draws us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth:
accept our heartfelt praise
as we worship you,
our Saviour and our eternal God.
Amen

For Fathers' Day

A Prayer

We give our thanks, Creator God, for the fathers in our lives.
Fatherhood does not come with a manual, and reality teaches us that some fathers excel while others fail.
We ask for your blessings for them all and forgiveness where it is needed.
This Father's Day we remember the many sacrifices fathers make for their children and families, and the ways--both big and small--they lift children to achieve dreams thought beyond reach.
So too, we remember all those who have helped fill the void when fathers pass early or are absent; grandfathers and uncles, brothers and cousins, teachers, pastors and the women of our families.
For those who are fathers, we ask for wisdom and humility in the face of the task of parenting. Give them the strength to do well by their children and by you.
Amen. *(Jesuit Resource)*

Strength of a Mountain

God took the strength of a mountain,
The majesty of a tree,
The warmth of a summer sun,
The calm of a quiet sea,
The generous soul of nature,
The comforting arm of night,
The wisdom of the ages,
The power of the eagle's flight,
The joy of a morning in spring,
The faith of a mustard seed,
The patience of eternity,
The depth of a family need,
Then God combined these qualities,
When there was nothing more to add,
He knew His masterpiece was complete,
And so, He called it ... Dad

(Author Unknown)

Blessing

Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary,
Revealed in his glory;
Worshipped by angels,
Proclaimed among the nations,
Exalted to the highest heavens,
Believed in throughout the world.
Blessed be God, our strength and our salvation,
Now and for ever.
And the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.
Amen