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Introduction

The story of the birth of Jesus as found in the gospels of Luke and Matthew is an interpretation of the beginning of Jesus' life seen through the prophecies of the Jewish scriptures so familiar to the writers of the gospels. In Luke, an angel appears to Mary, in Matthew Joseph has an apparition of an angel in a dream, either way the divine intervenes in the daily life of Mary and Joseph in exactly the way Jesus refuses to allow in his temptation, or pleads for unsuccessfully in his prayer at Gethsemane. The appearance of angels is not something many of us can expect to experience. The conflict in the Christmas story is between a story of faith and a history of ordinary events.

Text

Matthew 1:18–25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Comment

In our modern Christmas nativities, this account of the birth of Jesus as written in Matthew's gospel is woven together with the elements in Luke's story to make a single whole. However unsatisfactory the resultant structure, the combination allows vignettes of the different Christmas elements to be brought together in a single act of worship, the nativity play.

Pulling the threads apart, and looking at the two gospel accounts separately, contrasts begin to emerge. The story in Matthew is like a folk-tale, full of threat and conflict. A menacing king, is threatened in his power. The innocent, mute, virgin mother, Mary, is the counterpoint to this dangerous king.

In Matthew the mechanism for angelic intervention is dreams. Just as in the narratives of the characters of Joseph and his multi-coloured garment, or Daniel and the fire, the convention of hearing God's guidance through a dream is used to drive the narrative forward. This gives the narrative a structure and framework which is about the divine interrupting the normal or every-day.

Mary is a very passive character in Matthew's narrative, she does not speak a word, or indeed initiate an action. Her fate is decided by Joseph, following the angel's appearance in his dream – and we are given no indication as to the description of that angel – except that it was an angel of the lord.

The story follows a familiar path, the angry king threatened by the arrival of foreign wise men or magi, who tries to destroy the child that poses a threat. Two further dreams provide turning points in favour of our hero-child, the first telling the magi to return by another road, and the second telling Joseph to flee to Egypt and thus save Jesus from the slaughter of the innocents.

Without the shepherds, without the census, without the inn – in Matthew Jesus is born in a house over which the star stops – the story is one not of humble poverty but of the status of Christ as king in the kingdom of God. Herod's motivation is one of jealousy, Joseph's of decency, Mary's of submission to God's will. These actors give us a picture of Christmas which is a contrast between the power of God's kingdom and the power of the kingdoms of this world. This conflict of worldly power versus God's power is one which will be a vein throughout Matthew's writing about Jesus' ministry.

It is a conflict Christians cannot fail to see in our world today, and the question we might wish to ask ourselves is this, if God's angel appeared in a dream tonight asking us to change direction to make a better world, what would that angel say to us? What would that dream be?

Response

Reading the story of Christmas as given to us in Matthew challenges us to think about power. Think about the role of Mary in this passage, she has no voice and takes no action. What does this tell us about the role of women in first century society? Is this simply how it was? Or is it how it ought to be?

OR

Think of a powerful nation or government today? In what ways can their power be challenged by the kingdom of god? How do they respond? Are there similarities between the modern response and the response of Herod?

Prayer

Storytelling God,
who gave to us the story of Christmas,
bringing to life the struggle
between your kingdom and our world,
grant that we may we be kingdom-bound this day;
having a love for the poor,
the weak, the voiceless in our hearts
and in our actions.
Through Jesus Christ, who was born a baby
in turbulent times, and grew to show your love
to our world.

AMEN