

BELIEVING IN THE VIRGIN BIRTH

4th Sunday in Advent

Texts: Isaiah 7.10-16; Romans 1.1-7; Matthew 1.18-end

“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1.23).

This morning’s Gospel reading presents us with the *reason* for Christmas. It reminds what it is that we’ll be celebrating this time next week. Next Sunday, on Christmas Day, we won’t be celebrating merely the birth of a son to a Jewish mother of no historical importance in Palestine long, long ago. Rather, in that birth, we’ll be celebrating the Incarnation of God, the moment in history when the Maker and Ruler of All Things took on human flesh and came among us.

It’s a grand story, of course; but is it credible? Can we really believe it?

Well, before we answer that question, we need to ask another. We need to ask, Why should we care? Why should it matter? There are many more things that are true than are worth believing. It might be true that your surname appears 161 times in the Oxford telephone directory. That might be a truth, but it’s not an interesting or significant one. It’s not worth believing. It’s not something over whose credibility you’re likely to lose sleep.

At least, I hope not.

So what’s significant about the story of the Incarnation, and by extension the Virgin Birth? Why should they matter to us?

They should matter to us because of what they tell about the love of God. What they tell us is that God doesn’t love at a safe arm’s length. He doesn’t love at a safe, patronizing distance. He doesn’t love with one eye fixed on

his own dignity. He loves with a single-mindedness that isn't distracted by anxiety over his own status or vulnerability.

So He draws alongside us, meets us on our own territory, rubs shoulders with us, looks us in the eye. And so, with His presence, He dignifies us. By coming down, He raises us up.

That's why the Incarnation and the Virgin Birth matter: they tell us that the Maker and Ruler of All Things really is *with* us. They tell us that he *really* loves us.

You might have heard of Princess Di. You might remember, or have been told, how deeply and widely she was adored by complete strangers. Indeed, the extent of her appeal was so extraordinary as to require an explanation. One explanation, I think, was that her life told a secular version of the story of the Incarnation. For here was one from on high, who did not count royalty a thing to be grasped, who suffered as ordinary mortals do, and who came *incognito* under cover of darkness to accompany and comfort the diseased and the dying—specifically, AIDS patients.

It's a very moving story. It's moving because it demonstrates a love that is strong enough to expose itself and make itself vulnerable. But suppose that Princess Di hadn't visited the AIDS patients herself. Suppose that she'd sent her butler instead. We wouldn't be half so impressed. Indeed, we probably wouldn't be impressed at all. For the story to have its attractive power, it's vital that the one from on high should put her own money, so to speak, where her mouth is. It's vital that she should love enough to put herself on the line.

As with Princess Di, so with almighty God. The Incarnation is the embodiment of a love that cares so much for the beloved that it cares not a whit about its own status, about protecting its own dignity, about how rubbing shoulders with the great unwashed might tarnish its own shine. That's part of why the Incarnation, and therefore the Virgin Birth, matters.

But the story of the Incarnation is not just a religious illustration of a morally exemplary kind of love. It's also, and in the first place, an assertion that this love characterizes God himself. In the second chapter of his Epistle to the Philippians, St Paul makes clear that the moral point follows from the theological one:

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2.5-7).

So the Incarnation is first and foremost a statement about God, and only secondarily a statement about ethics. But, you might say, so what? What does the *theological* statement mean? Why does *it* matter?

Well, Christians believe that human life is not—as a drunken undergraduate once put it to me—just a matter of what we can get away with. We believe that human life is so valuable that we will be held to account for how we have spent it.

And for those of us who are aware of what we've squandered, for those of us who know what it's like to be Prodigal Sons and Daughters—for those of us it's very good news to learn that the One to whom we're ultimately accountable isn't sniffy about being in the company of the unclean, nor is he ruffled by being in the presence of the compromised.

It's very good news to learn that the One who will judge us prefers not to stand above us wagging his finger, exploiting our sense of guilt to inflate his own self-esteem.

It's very good news to learn that when judgement comes, as it will, it comes in the form of compassion that strains toward our healing and wholeness.

That's why the Incarnation of God matters: not just as a model of self-oblivious love, but also and foremost as a claim that this love characterizes the One who will dignify us by holding us to account for the spending of our lives, even the secret spending.

That's why the Incarnation matters. And that's why the Virgin Birth matters, because it offers an account of how the Incarnation came to be. But is that account credible? Is it believable that a virgin should give birth to a child?

Well, if I *didn't* believe in God, and if I *did* believe that the cosmos were ruled by laws of nature that couldn't be broken, then I'd find the story of the Virgin Birth *incredible*.

But I don't see the cosmos as ruled by inviolable laws. Rather, I see it as made up of ordinary patterns of behaviour that hold under usual conditions. Given unusual conditions, however, extraordinary things can happen. And since I believe in God, I believe in a power that could cause unusual conditions. So I don't find the Virgin Birth to be beyond the bounds of possibility. Nor, therefore, do I find it to be beyond belief.

So: life is not just a matter of what we can get away with--thankfully. We *are* dignified by being held accountable for how we spend our lives, even in secret.

The *great* good news is that the One to whom we're accountable has no interest in standing over us and wagging his finger. Instead, He comes down, to raise us up.

Since there are no laws that can't be broken, He could have come down via the pregnancy of a virgin.

"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, 'God with us'" (Matthew 1.23).

Amen.

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18 December 2016

