

Advent

(What can we learn about the birth of Jesus?)

Week 3. What and Why?

Introduction to Week Three

In this session we will look at contextual background and why the two nativity narratives are included

Opening Prayers

O Lord open our lips
And our mouth shall declare your praise

Rejoice and be glad
For you are the light of the world
And great is your reward in heaven

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes. (Psalm 19)

Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and redeemer.

God of gentleness and love
Be with us tonight as we draw near to you
Dwell in every heart and conversation as we join for our final session
Open our hearts and minds to see and hear your message as we discuss your word.

Help us to see more clearly what you are calling us to be
And what you are calling us to do.

Assist us, by your Spirit, to better understand how we can contribute to the building of your kingdom and the glorification of your Son.

Amen

Dwelling in the word Luke 2. 8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Keep a few moment's silence. In the silence notice where your attention lingers. It may be a word or phrase which strikes you, or a question you want to ask.

Discuss as a group or in pairs the message or thoughts that came into your mind whilst reading the passage

Background

The majority opinion dates Matthew c 70 AD. Ignatius of Antioch shows a knowledge of Matthew which positions him in the last quarter of the first century. Following the revolt of 66 AD - 70 AD the Pharisees emerged as the dominant force in Judaic religion and culture. They were particularly concerned with the disunity of the Jewish people, and the influx of external movements both pagan and Christian. They sought to re-establish a strict Jewish religious calendar. In Matthew's time the Pharisaism was defining itself as the unifying force within Israel and was positioning itself in opposition to all others. To Christians this would feel like deliberate persecution. The cohesion of the community to which Matthew belonged was no doubt strengthened by such perceived persecution and criticism drawing them together against a common adversary.

This Christian community's identity sought to legitimise belief in Jesus against such opposition. Matthew's gospel does not try to lose its Jewish inheritance; rather it tries through a message of love, peace and reconciliation to bridge the gulf between Jewish and Gentile believers, albeit with warnings as to what failure to accept Jesus would bring about. Matthew concentrates on the teaching of Jesus, and its guidance for a Christian life, elaborating in 620 verses of teaching matter whereas Mark offers only 240 verses.

There are two theories about the dating of Luke's gospel. Some believe the reference in Paul's letters to a companion called Luke, (Col 4.14. Philemon 24, 2 Timothy 4.11) would position him between 50AD and 90AD. Others narrow it down further to c 80-85 AD around the same time as Matthew and responding to a similar situation where the vast majority of Jews had rejected the Gospel, and the future of Christian belief was looking to be centred on the Gentiles.

The early Christians saw Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish salvation history. Paul for example believed that the Gentiles should turn to the God of Israel. The God of Israel becomes the God of Christianity, not a different deity.

Despite this, it is thought that Pharisaic opposition and possibly local tensions caused Luke to write his gospel, which transcends these issues to present to his fellow Christians a proclamation of God's work through Jesus, raising their sights and faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

There is a further consideration that may have influenced both authors. The effect of the revolt of 66AD-70AD in which the Jews rebelled against the Roman occupation ultimately ended with an utterly devastating siege of Jerusalem and a recriminatory destruction of the Temple in 70AD. Many of the towns and villages where Jesus had spent his ministry were laid waste. Communities were dispersed or destroyed and the generation that had witnessed Jesus was dying out. The stories previously orally passed on and handed down were in danger of being lost forever.

Whereas Matthew leaves little doubt that Israel's rejection of Jesus brings about its own rejection by God, Luke insists that some part of Israel is receptive to Jesus as the promised Messiah. There is a sharp distinction between the acceptance and rejection respectively of the 'people' and the religious leadership. This is important when we come to discuss the reasons for the infancy narrative. It is significant that from the infancy narrative onwards the focus of Luke reveals that Jesus has come to bring comfort to the poor.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke contain some 220 verses in common and of Mark's 661 verses some 80% feature in Matthew whereas 60% appear in Luke. There can be no doubt that there was some form of literary relationship between the three gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and the possibility of viewing the three together has led to the labelling of them as the Synoptic Gospels.

Why were the Nativity stories included?

There are several thoughts and arguments regarding this question. Each Nativity story is a stand-alone narrative and may have been an addition to the original gospel. It is believed by scholars that the early Church started with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Having established the divine credentials associated with such a miraculous event, the followers, wanted to know more and the stories about his life and ministry were introduced. When it came time to write these down, all four gospels position their principal story at the start of Jesus' ministry.

Why then would Matthew and Luke take the further step of adding nativity stories to their gospels. If, as it is believed, Mark's was the first gospel, what other sources would Mathew and Luke have used to write their two versions? None of the Disciples were present during Jesus' early life. Some suggest that Mary may have been the source but her relationship with the Disciples has never been shown as 'close'. Joseph is another possibility, but this is pure conjecture and there is no comment or proof to support this. In fact, there is no historical proof for any of the events described.

But this does not mean that there is no truth in the stories. Jesus was born of Mary and his father, legal or paternal, was Joseph. They did live in the Nazareth region, whether Nazareth itself or Bethlehem, depends on which account you read. There were several census' by the Roman authorities for taxation reasons and Quirinius was Governor of Syria although records show this was not before 5AD. Jewish law does proscribe presentation of a child in the Temple although Luke's account is subverted by his inaccurate detail of the process and probably reflects his Gentile origin and 'second hand' knowledge of Judaic law.

Whether or not the infancy narratives are historically correct to the last detail, or based on eyewitness testimony, their accuracy is never going to be proven. However, one cannot ignore the fact that both Matthew and Luke believed their narratives to be the appropriate introductions to the divinity and ministry of Jesus. In the words of Raymond E. Brown *(1977) (an authority on the Nativity accounts):

'To give them less value than other parts of the Gospels is to misread the mind of the evangelists for whom the infancy narratives were fitting vehicles of a message they wanted to convey. Indeed, from this point of view the infancy narratives are not an embarrassment but a masterpiece. Perhaps precisely because the material had been less fixed during apostolic preaching, the evangelists exercised greater freedom of composition in the infancy narratives. One is hard pressed to find elsewhere in the Gospels theology so succinctly and imaginatively presented...the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke are just as profoundly Christian and as dramatically persuasive as the last two chapters, the story of the passion and resurrection'

Both accounts position Jesus in salvation history. He is the 'Son of Abraham', underlining the Jewishness of Jesus; He is the 'Son of David' recognising the messianic dignity of Jesus and also as 'Emmanuel' or God with us. Both accounts make Jesus' origins more intelligible against Old Testament prophecy. The parallels in Matthew to Moses are deliberate and add scriptural strength to the view that Jesus had come to save his people, bringing them out of the bondage of sin. Although Luke also positioned Jesus in salvation history, he did not support the 'new Moses' theory. As we discussed last week, Luke positions Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish messianic prophecy.

We often forget that the Jews already had their own Bible, the Old Testament. The evangelists were not historians. Nor were they dishonest. They genuinely believed in Jesus as Messiah and that he fulfilled the promise of Hebrew scripture. E.P. Saunders (1993)** argues:

'If he did so (fulfil the promise of scripture) in one case presumably he did so in another. There were some genuine overlaps, and this made it very easy for the early Christians to add new facts derived from scripture...the gospel material is not unique in modifying Jewish typological expectation to fit changed circumstances. On the contrary, other writers of the time appealed to salvation history by using names and titles from the past, while making substantive changes'

Saunders goes on to describe how in Jewish scripture an event or person becomes a prototype for a future event which when fulfilled by someone or something at a later date, informs or adds detail to the second event. This backward justification is common throughout Matthew and to some extent Luke, in using Old Testament scripture to verify and authenticate events in Jesus' life and ministry. The more parallels there were to find between Jesus and the prophecies in Hebrew scripture, the more likely were the

evangelists to invent more; the clearest examples being the differences we can find between the nativity narratives.

Summary

Christmas is the second most important time in the Christian calendar. For some the commemoration of Christmas even exceeds Easter. But either way Christmas is important and how we understand the stories of Jesus: birth does matter. As we have discussed, the stories are often sentimentalised, and the individual narratives muddled into a composite tale that is told the world over.

There is an emotional power in them: they touch the deepest yearnings inside us all, for peace, light in the darkness, the fulfilment of our hopes and for a better, safer world. There is also a magic in the birth of a new baby and most of us would be hard pressed not to get a little sentimental on the subject.

Yet the stories are more than this. They carry a political and personal message of transformation. They suggest new and different ways of approaching, understanding and changing our lives and our society. In their own way they challenge us, and they challenge our society, to improve the way we all live. Above all, they offer hope. Hope for the future and for our world.

If the Nativity stories are not 100% historically accurate or proven, it does not mean they are not important. Story telling is as old as mankind. It is the root of who we are. Whenever people meet, they express themselves in stories. Some are true, some are factual, some may be embellished, but storytelling is still the main vehicle for conversation when people meet. The Nativity stories are undoubtedly beautiful and have a lasting appeal which has survived through the centuries. They resonate within us and live in our minds. Regardless of whether there were shepherds, stars and wise men, at the centre of the story is the one character who does not say anything. The baby Jesus is who he is. He is the one factual detail that can not be turned into a story because he is the Christ child. This baby, so fragile and vulnerable, totally dependent on Mary and Joseph is still the most powerful person ever to walk the earth. The stories provide a framework through which we can begin to understand the mystery of God made man. He is the centre of this story. Matthew's story highlights the authority and importance of the Christ child introducing the wise men who bow down and worship him. Luke stresses the circumstances of the lowly birth and introduces the shepherds to illustrate that Jesus' ministry will be with the poor and dispossessed. Both authors may have drawn on scripture and embellished the story to add significance to the birth, but none of this can take away from the central most important point of both of the stories: Jesus is God made man and the Saviour of the World is now among us.

*Brown, R. (1977) *The Birth of the Messiah. A Commentary on the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke*, London, Chapman

** Saunders E.P. (1993), *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, London, Penguin Group

Closing Prayers

God of gentleness and love

We thank you for being with us tonight

For drawing us together

And helping us to consider and discuss the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke

Create in us the desire to look for you in all we see and do

Help us to discern all that you are calling us to be

And all that you are calling us to do.

Assist us, by your Spirit to seek more understanding

To help us build your kingdom on earth to the glory of your Son

Our saviour and Lord Jesus Christ

Amen

Almighty God,

whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life:

raise us, who trust in him,

from the death of sin to the life of righteousness,

that we may seek those things which are above,

where he reigns with you

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, world without end.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Let us bless the Lord

Thanks be to God. Amen