

Advent

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

Week 2. Luke's Nativity Story

Introduction to Week Two

In this session we will explore Luke's Nativity story, looking at contextual themes, focus and prophetic fulfilment

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
Draw near to us today as we draw near to you
Dwell in every heart and conversation as we study Luke's gospel
Open our hearts and minds to your message.

Help us to discern together all that you are calling us to be
And all that you are calling us to do.

Assist us, by your Spirit, to become a more contemplative,
more compassionate and more courageous Church
For the building of your kingdom and the glory of your Son.

Amen

Dwelling in the word Luke 1. 26-35, 2. 1-7

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'

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.

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

Over the centuries there has developed a tendency to merge Matthew's and Luke's Nativity narratives into a composite Nativity story. One rarely sees a nativity play without a full cast of angels, donkeys, shepherds, wise men and if you are lucky, an over acted Herod. Yet there are so many contradictions between Luke's version and Matthew's that its worth separating them so that their individual messages do not get blurred or lost. For example, the genealogies offered by both are incompatible and cause some to question their authenticity. It is likely that they employed different source documents, but the objective was the same, to evidence that Jesus was descended from David, thereby fulfilling the messianic prophecy that Jesus was 'of the house of David'. Ironically, having established Joseph's lineage, both writers then argue the virgin birth which in turn undermines the descendancy and messianic claim.

There are several other discrepancies. Luke places Joseph's original home at Nazareth, whereas Matthew says it was Bethlehem. The conception of Jesus through the Holy Spirit is announced only to Joseph in Matthew but in Luke's version it is only told to Mary. Matthew describes Joseph's doubts about Mary's pregnancy but there is no mention of this in Luke. Matthew describes Jesus being visited by the wise men in a 'house' whilst Luke talks about Jesus being born in a stable and laid in a manger because there was no room at the inn. Only Matthew talks about the star, the visit of the wise men and Herod's horrific actions in attempt to kill the baby thus prompting the flight into Egypt.

Luke is unique in introducing the story of John the Baptist, the angel telling Mary of Elizabeth's pregnancy and Mary's subsequent trip to visit her. Luke also offers us the story of the shepherds, the circumcision of Jesus and his presentation in the Temple, but no mention of the flight to Egypt.

Short discussion:

To begin our discussion, how do you feel about the two versions being so different?

Does it matter?

Given these radical contradictions and omissions why do you think the Nativity Story survived and merged into the composite form popular today?

What else makes Luke's Nativity story different from Matthew's?

We have talked before about the different audiences being addressed by the Gospel writers and the corresponding styles and emphasis they employed to focus their message. In Matthew the writing was aimed at a Jewish congregation well versed in scripture and prophecy, the story of promise and fulfilment. Luke was writing for a wider audience predominantly gentile. But both writers offer hope for a reformed world and the theme of fulfilment runs through both stories. Matthew employs scripture to confirm Christ as Messiah. But it is in Luke where we find the message of hope and fulfilment and the conviction that God's promise is being redeemed in the form of Jesus. He does this through three special prayers/hymns, the Magnificat, the Benedictus and the Nunc Dimitis, sung respectively by Mary, Zechariah and Simeon.

Read now these three prayers and assess how you respond to them:

*^ My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever'*

*'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness*

*before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'*

*'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'*

Take a moment to briefly reflect on what you have just read. What are your thoughts?

The Magnificat and Benedictus are at once religious, political, social and spiritual, giving promise of a reformed world. But it is in the Nunc Dimittis that we find the ultimate promise and fulfilment theme. What Simeon has waited for, what Israel has waited for, is now being fulfilled in Jesus.

Final thoughts and comment

There are three further themes that differentiate Luke's version of Jesus' birth from Matthew's: his emphasis on women, the marginalised and the Holy Spirit. In his Nativity story, Luke focuses on Mary, whereas Matthew, concentrates on Joseph and the fulfilment of prophecy through dreams. Throughout Luke's gospel there is mention of more women, and a balancing of male and female involvement, than in any of the other gospels.

In Luke, it is the marginalised, the shepherds, the lowest of the low, to whom the angels announce the birth of Jesus. Matthew describes the wise men as witnesses to Jesus' birth. There is a definite emphasis throughout Luke's gospel on the obligations of the rich to the poor and the marginalisation of the lower classes and outcasts. Do not forget Mary's recital of God's promises now being fulfilled by Jesus, in the words of her Magnificat:

He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.

Finally, in what is probably the most important emphasis for Luke, everything happens through the Holy Spirit. Both Matthew and Luke mention the angelic messengers but only Luke describes the Holy Spirit coming on several of the key people in his narrative: John the Baptist (1.15), Mary (1.35), Elisabeth (1.41), Zachariah (1.67) and Simeon (2. 25-27). After the initial emphasis that Jesus' birth and life will be directed by the Holy Spirit, Luke continues his emphasis on the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit throughout Acts.

Any final comments or observations about Luke's Nativity story?

Next time we will conclude this short Advent program by looking at the possible reasons in the contextual background of the stories.

Closing Prayers

God of gentleness and love
Draw near to us as we draw near to you
Dwell in every heart and conversation
Fashion in us the likeness of your Son Jesus Christ
Help us to discern together all that you are calling us to be
And all that you are calling us to do.
Assist us, by your Spirit to become a more contemplative, more compassionate
and more courageous Church
For the building of your kingdom and the glory of your Son.

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