

Brancepeth sermon
21 December 2025

Romans 1.1-7

Matthew 1.18-25

Psalm 80.1-8, 18-20

May I speak in the name of the Father,

and of the Son,

and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

Our gospel reading today is part of a *very* familiar story,
one of the most familiar in the Bible, I guess.

Even if we haven't memorised the exact wording
most of us could probably, without too much effort,
re-tell the whole Christmas story, from the annunciation
all the way through to the arrival of the magi.

But that very familiarity can generate some odd effects.

I don't know if your experience of hearing
our gospel reading from Matthew today
was anything like mine,
but I found myself noticing how *little* of the familiar story
actually appears in Matthew's version.
True, if we had carried on, we would have had the visit of the magi,
but in the story leading up to that point
there is so no census, no trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem,
no inn and no manger, no shepherds -
and, before that, *no annunciation*.
All of *that* material is in Luke, not Matthew.

It is an odd fact that we read four different gospels in our Bible.
At various points in the early centuries of the church's life
before decisions had been finalised
about exactly which books would be in the Bible,
some people said, 'Wouldn't it be less confusing
if there was just one gospel,
telling the story in one harmonious way?'

And some people did indeed produce harmonised versions,
stitching together all four gospels into one continuous narrative.
But ultimately, as the church finalised those decisions about
what was going to be in the Bible and what was not,
they said: ‘No, we are sticking with the original four,
even though there are differences,
even though that creates some problems,
These are earliest and most reliable witnesses we have to Jesus’ story,
and who are we to tidy them all up?’

And the four gospels *are* different:

Three of them, Matthew, Mark and Luke,
are very similar in style, and have strongly overlapping content;
they are often called the ‘synoptic’ gospels
which simply means the gospels ‘to be seen together’.

It is clear, given how many and how close the overlaps are
that, one way or another,
their authors used each other as sources,
and shared other common sources,

though exactly who copied from whom, and how much –
well, that's a controversy that has been
entertaining academics and keeping them off the streets for *centuries*.

And then there is John's gospel,
not one of the 'synoptics', because it doesn't look like the other three;
it is, in fact, very different from them.

It's not just that it tells things in a different order,
not just that it skips some familiar things –
and includes things the others don't mention –
it's that the whole thing is written in a different style
and that a lot of the content is more mysterious.

Now, we do keep the gospels somewhat distinct
in the way we read them in church.

In the church's lectionary –
the agreed list of what passages we will read each Sunday –
we have a three-year cycle for our gospel readings:
we go through one synoptic gospel a year,
so one of Matthew, Mark, or Luke –

and this advent we've just started on a Matthew year,
and we'll be reading Matthew all the way through to
the Sunday before *next* advent.

And the Gospel of John doesn't get a year of its own,
but is read in bits throughout all three years.

But I suspect that, for most of us,
it is hard to keep clearly in mind
exactly what turns up in which gospel,
or how the stories they tell differ in the telling.

One of the places, however, where there are *most* differences
- and this is the whole reason I have been telling you all this -
is in what they say about Jesus' birth.

Only two of the gospels have birth narratives, in fact:
Luke and Matthew.

Neither John nor Mark has any narrative of Jesus' birth.

And although both Matthew and Luke do,
this is one of the areas where
we *don't* have one of them copying from the other,
or both of them using the same source material,

not one of the places where they tell basically the same story
with only minor variations.

Because the stories they tell are quite markedly different.

And the reason I have been dwelling on all this
is *not* because the run-up to Christmas has been quite busy,
and it's easy to pad out a sermon
with a bit of academic filler about the differences between the gospels,
– no, no, not at all; not at all! –
it's because it can be worthwhile, sometimes,
for us to pay close attention to the differences between the gospels,
to allow those differences to cast a sidelight
on familiar stories.

And when it comes to our specific passage today,
there's one really marked difference that I want you to notice.

In Luke, the angel Gabriel comes to Mary,
to tell her that she is to give birth;
Mary takes a journey alone to her cousin Elizabeth;
and Mary gets a major speaking role,
more, I think, than anyone else in Luke's gospel other than Jesus:

not just in her brief responses to the angel,
but in the song she sings when she gets to Elizabeth,
the song we know as the ‘Magnificat’;
and that song effectively makes Mary a prophet,
and a prophet of *revolution* at that,
announcing that, with the coming of Jesus
God ‘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.’

In *Matthew’s* telling, by contrast, Mary has no speaking role.

We get no annunciation story,
no meeting between Mary and the angel –
we are simply told that ‘she was found to be with child’
and we are not told who did the finding.

There’s no mention of her going to see Elizabeth,
or indeed, of her doing anything much at all.

The only active verbs that Matthew assigns to Mary are
in those phrases ‘she will bear’, and ‘she had borne’ –

she simply turns up as the woman in whose womb Jesus will be carried.

And she carries that child in silence

Joseph gets a description (he is a 'righteous man'),

and he gets his own active verbs:

he makes plans, he wakes up, he does as the angel commanded him,

he gives Jesus his name,

but Mary stays in the background,

from the point of view of the narrator,

and from our point of view as readers.

Matthew, it seems, just isn't that interested in her.

But *God* is.

God's Holy Spirit has singled her out, from amongst all other women;

- the same Spirit to whom Paul will refer,

at the start of the letter from the Romans, in our other reading,

the Spirit who announces that Jesus is Son of God

by raising him from the dead -

the Spirit who is the life-giving power of God.

And Matthew does tell us, firmly, that the child that Mary carries
is ‘from the Holy Spirit’,
has been given life by the Holy Spirit.

And he tells us the child she is carrying is ‘Emmanuel’
that is, ‘God with us’.

Even in Matthew’s telling, it is clear that
God has singled Mary out to be the bearer of ... well, God.
And if you want another bit of academic filler –
sorry, I mean, another bit of
useful and appropriate background information –
I can tell you that, in later church history,
there was a controversy about Mary,
and whether she could be called ‘*Theotokos*’
which is Greek for ‘God-bearer’,
– whether she could be referred to as
the one who bore God in her womb.

And some people said, ‘We are not sure about that;
it doesn’t seem quite right;
it’s one thing to say Jesus is God once he’s born,

but do we really want to say that God was
right there in Mary's womb, *within* her, *attached* to her,
sharing her blood and all the rest?

Isn't that a bit much?

But the answer the church settled on,
the answer that became the orthodox answer,
was, emphatically, 'Yes, Mary *is* the God-bearer;
she really did have God in her womb –
God in human form, God's own human life.
Her body really was a temple in which God was present.'

So, from God's point of view,
Mary is not at all in the background of the picture;
she is right in the foreground.

And so, while it may be true that we don't get
Mary's revolutionary song, Mary's Magnificat,
in Matthew's telling,
there *is* a kind of revolution even here, albeit a subtler one.

Because the way in which Matthew tells the story
suggests one kind of hierarchy,
one kind of way of measuring who matters and who does not,
who is deemed worth talking about, and who is not,
and that is a scale on which Mary is left at the bottom
passive, silent, hardly worth mentioning.

But the story that Matthew actually *conveys*,
the story of *God's* action,
establishes a very different hierarchy,
a different way of measuring who matters and who does not.
And Mary is right at the *top* of that scale.

And as the story goes on,
God's scale of measurement will be the one that persists:
Joseph is going to drop out of the picture entirely,
and it will be Mary who remains,
right to the end of the gospels and beyond.

And this should be no surprise to us.

God *consistently* chooses those who seem weaker,
those who seem less important,
those we are tempted to think of as the bit-part players,
the extras, the background characters;
God *consistently* chooses those whom the world deems foolish
to put the wise to shame;
God *consistently* chooses those whom the world deems weak,
to achieve what the supposedly strong can never achieve.
God, after all, is in the business of upending hierarchies.

As Mary herself sang, even if Matthew did not record it:
‘God 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.’

And, whichever gospel we are reading,
that God of reversals is the God we worship.

Amen