



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

22 December 2019: Choral Matins

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:26-38

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+ 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.' (Luke 1:32)

Just three days before Christmas, it seems rather late to be listening to the story of the Annunciation. Mary (and Joseph) have had almost nine months to adjust to this astonishing news, and are now trying to make the best of their uncomfortable and unsuitable accommodation, preparing for their infant's imminent birth. We might feel more inclined to rise to the allusions in our first reading, from the eighth-century prophet Micah, who wrote about Bethlehem of Ephrathah, one of the little clans of Judah, and the birth of one who would rule in Israel.

To a Christian audience, this obviously anticipates the birth of Jesus. Recall the passage from Luke's gospel that will be the sixth lesson in our services of Nine Lessons and Carols and the gospel reading at Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. There the evangelist explains how, following the decree from the Emperor Augustus that all the world should be taxed, Joseph '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.' (Luke 2:4) In his gospel account of Jesus' birth, Matthew even paraphrased Micah's prophecy. When, Matthew wrote, Herod the king asked the chief priests and scribes of the people where the Messiah was to be born, they told him: 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."' (Matthew 2:5-6)

Let us pause for a moment to reflect on what these narratives about Christ's birth tell us about the divine plan for the incarnation. The angel Gabriel arrived at a particular time (in the 6th month of Elizabeth's pregnancy), in a particular place (a town in Galilee called Nazareth), having been sent, not to an anonymous woman, but to one particular person: Mary, a virgin betrothed to a man. One of the most important aspects of Christianity is

that it is an historical religion; the beliefs that we share rest on truth claims about events that occurred in specific places and at particular times. This morning I want to use our readings to reflect on two aspects of the historical details preserved about Christ's birth: why was it at Bethlehem, and why was Jesus born to Mary?

Let us start with that passage from Micah. To us, it foretells the birth of Christ, but that was far from the context in which Micah wrote. He prophesied at a bleak time in Israel's history, when the kingdom was over-run by the Assyrians, Jerusalem itself lay under siege (although it would not fall for some centuries to come), and many people had been deported into exile. The nation's judges had become corrupt and the priests had lapsed into idolatry, but true believers still placed their hope in the coming of the Messiah, a new David. This new leader would come not from Jerusalem, the city of David's kingship, but from the insignificant rural village, birthplace of David, the youngest of the sons of Jesse, who had begun his life minding the sheep.

Micah's vision combined the royal imagery of a strong ruler descended from the lineage of David, with the radical idea of a peaceful shepherd, caring tenderly for a restored and reunited community. When 'she who is in labour has brought forth, then the rest of his kindred shall return... and he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, ... they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth, ... the one of peace'. (Micah 5:3-5) This would be a ruler on no model that the ancient world had known before. No mighty military leader, or great demagogue, this would be a shepherd king. And he would be born in one of the most insignificant of the myriad of tiny villages of ancient Israel, at Judah's harvest centre Bethlehem, the place whose name means house of bread. It was over those fields that the Moabite woman, Ruth, had gleaned for heads of broken grain before she found security in marriage to Boaz, giving birth to a son who would be, as you will recall, father to Jesse and thus grandfather to David. From this house of bread, the new shepherd of whom Micah prophesied would feed his people, bringing them the peace and security for which they so desperately longed.

As we have already noticed, both Matthew and Luke drew the same connection between the lowly village Bethlehem and the royal line of David. Only Luke tells us why the Holy Family found itself in Bethlehem at the appointed time, but both made Jesus a descendant of David. This was, of course, essential to underpinning the truth claims that the evangelists sought to make about his birth. In order that Jesus might be shown to fulfil the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures and to be the promised Messiah, he needed not just to be holy and the Son of God; he had also to be the Son of Man, and specifically heir to the house of David.¹ As the angel said to Mary, after telling her that she would conceive and

bear a son called 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 (Luke 1:32) The earliest Christian writings affirmed the central importance of Jesus' Davidic lineage. It was mentioned several times in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, more obliquely in John's gospel, and also in the book of Acts and the Revelation to John. Jesus was the Son of God 'who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead', as St Paul wrote to the Romans (Rom 1:3-4).

Luke and Matthew both traced Jesus' Davidic descent through Joseph, explaining that Joseph was a member of the House of David, and declaring him to have been Jesus' father by legal adoption. This claim is not wholly unproblematic, not least because Matthew traced Joseph's descent from David via his son Solomon (Matt 1:6), whereas Luke made Joseph a descendant of the non-royal Nathan (Luke 3:31). Early Christian writers struggled to reconcile these inconsistencies with their firm belief in the fact that Christ was indeed of the family of David 'according to the flesh', as well as the Son of God 'truly born of a virgin according to the will and power of God' (Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to Smyrna, I.1). An obvious solution to this dilemma would have been to argue that Mary, also, was a member of the family of David, something that many early Christian writers believed (Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian). It was entirely credible that Joseph would have betrothed himself to a girl from his extended clan group, and of course Mary's descent from David would support a literal reading of Paul's emphatic statement that Jesus was descended from David 'according to the flesh'. Belief in the Davidic descent of both Joseph and Mary became an essential part of the doctrine that Christ was simultaneously divine and human. Can we sustain such a view by reference to the gospels?

Let's return to the opening of this morning's second reading, '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.' Some early Christian commentators, including Origen and John Chrysostom, took this text to explain Mary's descent from David by arguing – not implausibly – that we should read the phrase 'betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph' in brackets, as a parenthetical aside to the main statement. On this reading, we assume that the original text had read simply 'engaged to a virgin of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary'.

If we take out the clause about Joseph, then we have Luke describing Mary exactly as he had earlier described Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah: 'His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth'. (Luke 1:5). The reference to Joseph breaks the flow of the

sentence and might indeed have been inserted at some later point in order to make the mention of Joseph in the following chapter seem less jarring. There we encounter Joseph for the first time in the statement: ‘Joseph went up to Judea to register in the city of David called Bethlehem, and with him went Mary, his betrothed’. Remember, while Matthew’s birth narrative focused on the angelic visitation to Joseph, for Luke it was Mary who received the heavenly figure. If we read the first sentence of our passage as having no reference to Joseph, but rather affirming Mary’s descent from David, it makes a lot more sense of the angel’s subsequent announcement that God will give to Mary’s son ‘the throne of his ancestor David’. (Luke 1:32; and cf. Zechariah’s reference to the saviour of the house of David: 1:69). And so, we may find it easier to see how Mary, reassured that ‘with God nothing will be impossible’, could declare herself to be the servant of the Lord, ready to have it be with her according to His word. If Mary, as well as Joseph, belonged to a family that counted King David among its ancestors then that might help to explain why God chose her to conceive in her womb and bear His Son.

In choosing Mary to be the God-bearer at the time that ensured her son’s birth would happen in Bethlehem, the divine Creator in his omnipotent omniscience chose to enter into the specific particularities of historical existence. The fact of Mary’s conception by the Holy Spirit confirms a crucial Christological issue: that Christ is truly God and truly man. As the definition agreed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 asserts: the very same one who was both, in relation to his divinity ‘begotten of the Father before the ages’, was, in relation to his humanity ‘born in the last days from the Virgin Mary, the mother of God.’ As we ponder these mysteries anew, readying ourselves to celebrate again the great mystery of the incarnation, when God became man and dwelt among us, let us pray

Ever faithful God, through prophets and angels
you promised to raise up a holy child,
who would establish a realm of peace and justice.
Stir our hearts to recognise Christ’s coming;
give us the grace to imitate Mary’s radiant obedience to your will;
and open our souls to receive the one
who comes to feed his flock
in the majesty of the name of the Lord our God. AMEN

ⁱ The argument that follows owes much to Markus Bockmuehl, ‘The Son of David and his mother’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 62 (2011), 476-93.