

Sunday 21 December 2025 – The Christmas Story Begins - Michael Bayley

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Advent. The familiar Christmas story begins. Michael Bayley encourages us to hear it afresh.

Readings:

Isaiah 7: 10-16. Matthew 1: 18-24

Sermon: The Christmas Story Begins – Michael Bayley

Over the Christmas Season we have the much loved stories from Matthew and Luke. How do we think about them? Do we just switch off our critical faculties and say, 'oh they're nice stories but they're not really true.' If we do that I think we would be gravely mistaken. They are indeed true, profoundly true, but in a different way. They may not be historically accurate but they convey profound and important truths about our Christian faith. It is helpful to look at the context within which Matthew's gospel was written - probably in the last quarter of the 1st century. The first part of that context is to realise what a powerful impact Jesus had on people

He changed people's lives and then these people were bursting to tell other people about it. Their lives had been transformed and they wanted to find ways in which they could get across to other people the amazing news about Jesus and encourage them to take Jesus seriously. The way he treated people, listened to them, understood them, healed them, loved them, challenged them, valued them and lived among them made them realise that he was a very special person

But there was more to it than that. Both the Jewish and Roman authorities could not cope with his searing honesty and directness. Also they were alarmed by the way he brought such hope to the common people who hung on his words and marvelled at what he did. Nor did the authorities like the way he criticised them and so they decided to get rid of him and of course that led to his appalling death, the death of a common criminal on a cross, a hideous and painful death. People thought that was it, just another brief spark of hope. People had even started wondering whether he really was the Messiah, so long expected, who would come to save the Jews from the Romans, the latest superpower to oppress them. Their hopes had been lifted only to be dashed.

But then something quite amazing happened. People became convinced that in some way Jesus was still very much alive and was a living, inspiring presence and you could see that in the way they behaved. They just had to tell everyone they met that the hopes Jesus had raised before his death were very *much* alive, So much so that, in some way they did not fully understand, they found themselves making the astonishing assertion, they found themselves coming to the astonishing conclusion that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, he was divine, he was God, and they wanted to tell everyone about it. The authorities tried to shut them up and failed completely. They were just so full of the sheer joy and conviction of the new life they had found which was transforming their lives. They started getting together in small groups and worshipping together and supporting one another. Their numbers kept growing. More and more people found that this man Jesus was bringing hope, purpose and meaning into their lives.

All sorts of people were joining the movement. At the start most of them were Jews though this changed over time. So, let imagine, that In one of these churches, as they were coming to be known, in Jerusalem the members were mostly Jews and they wanted to know as much as possible about Jesus. There was one member of this church was called Matthew. He was a bit of a scholar, as well as being good with numbers, and he had long been fascinated by the history and stories of his people the Jews and he was well acquainted with the scriptures. He started collecting all the stories and information he could about Jesus, where he came from, his family and his background in fact anything he could find out.

There was one thing that he and his fellow Jewish followers of Jesus were especially interested in. What did the scriptures have to say about Jesus which could confirm that he was indeed the long-awaited Messiah, so that they could convince their fellow Jews, and everyone else for that matter, that Jesus really was the Messiah. Naturally he and his friends searched the scriptures and they reckoned that they had found evidence that backed that belief. This was invaluable in helping them to enable others to realise that Jesus really was the one. Perhaps the most memorable prophecy was from Isaiah 7 verse 14 which we heard in our first reading. “Lo, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.”

I should add a footnote here. The version of the Hebrew scriptures that the early church used were not in Hebrew. They used the Greek version, the Septuagint, and in that version the Greek word used is ‘parthenos’ which does indeed mean ‘virgin’. However in the older Hebrew scriptures the word is ‘alma’ which means young woman. The difference is worth noting. But, in practice, it is the author’s way of asserting according to the conventions of the time that it was God who initiated the appearance of Jesus into the world. The author is making a theological point, not a physiological one

There were other prophecies which were seen as pointing to Jesus

That the Messiah would come from Bethlehem (Micah 5.2)

The slaughter of the children in Bethlehem by Herod when he found he had been deceived [Jeremiah 31.15)

The flight to Egypt and subsequent return which fulfilled the prophecy of Hosea 11.1

The family making their home in Nazareth (Isaiah 11.1 and Zechariah 3.8)

The stories that Matthew, if it was he, collected about Jesus eventually became formed into what we know as Matthew's gospel. What we need to understand is that Matthew's Gospel and the other gospels were written not by objective historians from a neutral standpoint but by people who believed passionately that Jesus is good news and they wanted to commend that good news to different audiences Jewish and non Jewish. As we have seen Matthew focused especially on a Jewish audience, whereas Luke concentrated more on a gentile audience.

Borg and Crossan put it rather well: “We propose that the Christmas stories are primarily parabolic overtures... based on biblical tradition rather than historical fact.”¹

Consider what riches the Christmas stories bring to the gospel message, especially the way they embed in our imaginations the incarnation, the complete humanity of Jesus, not as a doctrinal requirement in our heads, but in our imaginations, in the poetic part of ourselves, in our hearts.

Felicity showed us in her sermon last Sunday just how powerful that can be when she spoke about the subversive power of Mary's *Magnificat* especially the verses. “The Lord has put down the mighty from their seat and has exalted the humble and meek; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.”

After all this what do we have? We have a story about an apparent disaster - a pregnant unmarried young woman for whom her pregnancy could bring social disgrace, family rejection and a life in tatters. And a story about a decent man, Joseph, who is prepared to pay attention and listen, ignore the conventions of the time and look after his betrothed, and care for her and her child Jesus, a rightly treasured part of our Christian story, part of the overture to the Gospel.

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¹ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas. What the Gospels Really Teach Us About Jesus' Birth* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2008).