

Epiphany 2007
Sunday 7 January at 9.30am

As many of you know, Margaret and I became grandparents for the first time over the Christmas period. Originally due on December 17th, Eva Charlotte arrived ten days later on the Feast of the Holy Innocents. Having missed the birth of my daughter by being out on parish business, (don't ask, its still a sore point) and having been told by a rather grumpy sister that she really didn't want fathers in her delivery suite when my son was born in 1978, I was pleased to note that Tom was on hand to help deliver his daughter Eva and cut the cord.

Having preached about the vulnerability of the Christ-child over Christmas I was reminded again, holding Eva, of just how tiny and vulnerable newborn babies are and how much can go wrong at this crucial time. And when I reflected further on that thought it brought home to me again just how vulnerable Mary and Jesus were in those first weeks and months and just how risky it was for God to accept the limitations of human birth and life among us.

Indeed, when I was handed Eva I realized that I wasn't that confident in holding her and had to remind myself that I had brought up two children and, rather like riding a bike, its something you don't forget - that is until I remembered that I have forgotten how to ride a bike and the last time I tried I fell off. However, the other thing that struck me with some force was the way in which Eva's birth had been communicated. We still have a surprisingly clear scan image of Eva, thumb in mouth, looking comfortable and relaxed in the womb about 11 weeks after conception. However, I was still slightly surprised when news of the birth was accompanied by the first picture of Eva taken by Tom on his mobile 'phone camera less than one hour after her birth and sent to my mobile.

Now it needs to be said that, great though it was to get such an early and clear picture of Eva, nothing could be compared with actually making the trip down to Ipswich Hospital to see her and her new parents and to hold her. But how different all this is to Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus and to the way in which people came to know about him. Indeed, there is a bleakness about the birth of Jesus in Matthew. It lacks the joy of Luke's account. Acknowledged only by foreign magicians and forced to flee the country because of Herod's persecution, it is a bitter beginning.

It's easy to get the impression that, because Matthew's Gospel has the most Jewish flavour, it is less challenging to the status quo and less radical than the other canonical gospels, but this is far from the truth. It is true that Matthew is at pains to point out that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the son of David, the one foretold by the prophets. But in the first chapter of Matthew, the one that we rarely if ever read because it is a genealogy, a family tree, a 'Who do you think you are?' of Jesus, his line is not just traced back to King David, but all the way back to Abraham.

This is important to the early church and their understanding of Jesus because Abraham is not just the father of Judaism. God identifies him as the means by which all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. Now it is not clear how the people of Israel understood their role as being the covenant people of God. They never undertook 'evangelism' in the sense that we might understand that term as Christians though they allowed Gentiles to enjoy a limited membership of the faith if they felt themselves drawn

to it. But there are moments when the people imagine themselves part of a world wide context with a role to play in bringing all people to God.

The Old Testament passage that we heard this morning is from the man scholars have called 'Third Isaiah', the prophet working in that school or tradition of Isaiah when the people had come back from exile. He is looking forward to a time of fulfillment when all the people of Israel will be brought back from the four corners of the earth to live in Jerusalem and the nations will recognize the kingship of the God of Israel and will come to pay him homage and bring him gifts. Matthew may well have had this prophecy in mind when he tells of the gifts that the wise men brought to Jesus. However, the context is radically different. For a start it is only the wise men who come to pay homage to the infant Christ in Matthew's gospel. King Herod in his rage not only attempts to kill the wise men but also all the male children born in and around Bethlehem at that time.

Right from the beginning of the gospel Matthew makes it clear that God's promise to Abraham, that through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed, will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ in spite of the people of Israel and not because of them. Herod is merely the first of the Jewish establishment to attempt to destroy what God is doing in Jesus. He will not be the last. And this is the irony that is not lost on Matthew. The Jewish faith has by and large excluded Gentiles and banned astrology and all other similar forms of divination. However, when the Christ-child is born those Gentile magicians who search the stars find the Jewish King while those Jewish scholars who search the scriptures fail to recognise him.

And yet in the bitterness of the Christ-child's rejection, a light shines that will not be extinguished. As we know, there will be a huge debate in the early church about the gentile mission and whether or not the church should take its message out beyond the frontiers of Judaism. Many would oppose this work, championed by St Paul, including, in the early stages of the debate, St Peter himself. But the church grew to realize that they were called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people in all places at all times.

There were no mobile phones to take early pictures of the Christ child and if there were it would only have aided Herod in his pursuit. The Christ-child was unimaginably vulnerable, not just to poverty and disease, but to the violence of a King who wished to destroy him. But in this story told yearly on the feast of Epiphany there is both a hope and a challenge.

The hope is in the birth of a child who, though exiled and persecuted, will, through his life, death and resurrection, bring salvation to the world and bid us share that hope with all people. In him the promise made to Abraham is fulfilled.

The challenge lies in our ability to see what God is really doing. To bring the story of the wise men up to date, a couple of tarot specialists and a juggler from Glastonbury are able to discern what God is doing in Christ and to pay him homage while we either fail to notice or actively oppose him.

Who says this isn't a radical gospel?

Amen.