

“This is the Way Christ Comes”

(Matthew 1.18-25)

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Gardening

Some might call it ‘obsessive’, but I like to think of myself as a neat and tidy gardener. I’m ruthless with weeds; I plant things in neat rows... I sweep paths and rake leaves. But gardens are by nature *messy* imperfect things. Despite all my effort, the blackbirds wreak havoc in the pea straw every morning, the wind blows all manner of litter, things don’t grow the way I want them to... and we won’t even mention the possums! The garden laughs cheerfully at me... it mocks my need for neatness and order. And this is *one* of the reasons, why gardening is very very good for me!

The Text

Matthew begins our gospel text today with these words... “*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah happened in this way.*” We’re prepared for the Christmas event by being told ‘it took place **like this**’. And the ‘*this*’ it goes on to describe, is a messy process indeed! In fact... it’s chaotic!

We know what’s coming – the journey with an almost ‘term’ Mary, no room in the inn, birth in a stable (stuff everywhere), smelly shepherds, disoriented kings, mad tyrants and the final chaotic scramble to safety in Egypt. (It’s a complete shambles – one disaster after another!)

Today focuses on the beginning of it all... the unexplainable pregnancy! We need to stay with the scandal of it... not tidy it away too quickly... as *Matthew* himself wants to do... with his breathless reassurance, ‘*It’s all OK really because... well... it’s not what you’re thinking... the baby belongs to the Holy Spirit!*’ No, let’s just stay with the story as it unfolds for Joseph¹ ... He’s a man who’s just discovered his young bride is pregnant... and he knows it wasn’t him!

¹ After all that’s how *Matthew*’s trying to tell it.

(Let's make a brief digression into this thorny business of the *Virgin Birth*. The virginal conception of Jesus as a miracle of the Holy Spirit, *is* the teaching of orthodox Christian belief. But it's not essential to the faith, and we aren't required to embrace it.² The earliest witnesses knew nothing of it – Paul doesn't mention it, neither does the writer of the first gospel, *Mark*... and even the last gospel *John* doesn't include it. We do know, however, that illegitimacy was one of the claims brought by early critics in their bitter struggle with the emerging Christian movement, and we can understand the Church's sensitivity about such an accusation. For me, it's not an issue I lose sleep about one way or the other – it's simply a sacred story that I am willing to learn from.)

But back to the story itself... Joseph's a respectable man, who's discovered his young bride is pregnant... and he knows the child's not his! It's a scandal... a disgrace... a complete mess!

This is how Christ comes into the world.

Tidying the Mess

In my family, if you had a problem, you'd take it to Dad and he'd sort it out for you. It worked remarkably well for me as a child – I could then go to bed and sleep, while he worried it through to some form of resolution, that he'd tell you about in the morning. I remember many times, going to the toilet in the middle of the night and finding him still at the kitchen table... chain smoking... with pen and paper... working on a problem that belonged to me or my sisters... '*nutting it out*' he called it. I grew up thinking 'that's what a good man does' ... he sorts out problems for the people he loves.

So I totally *get* the Joseph story. *Matthew* tells us Joseph is a good man... and he wants to resolve this mess as discreetly and as honourably as possible. Clearly the marriage is off... but how can he do this in a way that not only meets *his* family's honour, but also gives protection to the adolescent Mary. Here's how Eugene Peterson translates it... "*Joseph, chagrined but noble, was determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced. While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream.*" It's just like my Dad

² I quote +Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, as my authority for this.

chain-smoking at the kitchen table... There is real stress in this... an anxiety that it must be resolved... that he's *got* to sort it... somehow. He's worrying about it when the dream comes... he's taken this problem to bed with him... tossing and turning with it. (Some of us may know a little about such behaviour...)

This is how Christ comes into the world.

God's Voice

God now enters the story... via an angel and a dream... What would we expect God to do? What's God's track record in such matters?

The ancient Jews had a terrible fear of disorder. And so in the creation stories, God puts strict boundaries around the chaos to contain it – God brings forth order and form from the primordial mess and mayhem. So when God enters *this* story, we can expect him to resolve the scandal... which God does indeed do... but it's not in the neat and tidy way *I'd* expect.

Notice what God says...

- *"Do not be afraid..."* The first thing that God addresses is Joseph's fear... his stress... and essentially God tells him to... cut it out, because it's neither warranted nor helpful. There is no need for anxiety here.
- The second thing God says is *'Don't you dare call off this marriage! Stop trying to change this. Let it be will you! Stop trying to sort this, stop trying to resolve this... for this mess is MY mess! This is MY way of doing business. I'm in charge of all of this! In fact, this is MY way of saving the world. So... HANDS OFF! Just marry the girl. For heavens sake... you've only got a small role in all this so just get on with it!*

This is how Christ comes into the world. **This** is how salvation comes...

Teaching

Matthew tells us the way Christ Jesus is born is very messy indeed... scandal... anxiety... disturbance... chaos. And it's not the only time the Christ-story runs this way. You'd hardly call the crucifixion a neat and tidy ending!

None of this is to deny the value our Christian tradition places on order, stability and steadiness... as a solid foundation for love... and as a necessary ingredient in growing to maturity of life. But it does ask us to look more trustingly, and more perceptively, at what we might at first perceive as mess and disorder. And it critiques that prevalent idea in contemporary society, that life is a problem to solve.

What if life is not something to be sorted... resolved... tidied? What if life is more about welcoming everything that comes... More about looking deeply within, to see the presence of God (where at first there only seemed chaos), and to see the movement of the Spirit (where at first there seemed nothing but disaster). What if like Joseph, we opened ourselves to the possibility... that something much bigger and more wonderful was happening, than we could at first conceive?

Conclusion

Even though it's *Matthew* who's presenting this story from Joseph's perspective, there's a big part of the writer that's clearly uncomfortable with it all. So he tries to apply his own order, by reading this pregnancy through the prophecy of *Isaiah*... a prophecy about a young woman bearing a son as part of God's destiny for the people of Israel. There is no reference to a virgin birth in this prophecy, but it allows *Matthew* to breath a sigh of relief and say, '*It was always intended to be this way.*'

And in doing so, he leaves us this beautiful title for Jesus Christ – *Emmanuel*... *God is with us!* As we prepare for the great feast of Christmas we remember, that God is with us in *THIS* world... with all its mess, complexity, disorder and imperfection. In fact *Matthew* tells us, ***this is the way Christ Jesus is born!***