

**Sermon for Mattins on the Fourth Sunday of Advent,
18th December 2016**

*Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25 - Babies, Terrestrial and
Celestial*



Some of you will know that, despite my youthful appearance, I am now a grandfather. My elder daughter Emma and her husband Joe were blessed with the birth of a

son, James, on 10th November. He weighed in at 7 lb 5 oz, (or 3.3 kg), and he is a bonny and fast-growing baby.

Having a baby seems to colour the lives of all around you for quite some time. Obviously as a grandparent I am spared the sleepless nights so far and the nappy changing, although I have said that I am perfectly willing to take my share. Fortunately, I don't think anyone really believes me, although I do mean it, honestly.

Something of that baby halo is perhaps the reason why Advent and Christmas are such a happy time for most of us. I went out yesterday to do my last minute present shopping – well, really, just my normal present shopping, as I always leave things rather late – and I have to say that I had a very pleasant time in Kingston, even though there were quite a few people about. The atmosphere was very jolly. There were carol singers and music students playing their instruments very beautifully as buskers on the corners. Everyone in the shops was very courteous and friendly. I even managed to park very easily.

Christmas is in the air. Saint Paul has it rather well in our first lesson [Romans 1:1-7]. There are in effect two types of baby celebration. What you could call normal babies - wonderful babies like my grandson James, who are, nevertheless, just ordinary human babies, so in Jesus's case, 'made of the seed of David according to the flesh', according to the flesh, just a normal, flesh-and-bone, human baby, and the unique, special baby, whom St Paul recognised as the Son of God. St Paul recognised Jesus as the Son of God as a result of his resurrection from the dead: 'declared to be the son of God with power, ..., by the resurrection from the dead'. It slightly begs the question whether St Matthew, in writing his gospel, might have been

adding a bit of a legend in telling us all about Mary and Joseph and their encounters with angels before the birth of Jesus.

Saint Paul, writing to the Romans, recognised Jesus as being divine as well as human, not because of the circumstances of his birth, but rather because of his resurrection. Maybe this doesn't matter hugely, because it is all, really, beyond human understanding. After all, if God is omnipotent, if God can do anything, then surely he can arrange for a baby to be conceived supernaturally, in the way described in two of the gospels.

The important thing to note is that both Mary and Joseph didn't behave in the way that you would expect normal people to behave when presented with an unexpected pregnancy. So far as I know, they didn't have milkmen or window cleaners to blame in those days in Bethlehem. So Joseph's magnanimity is even more impressive. All we can say is that clearly something very special happened, and a baby was born.

This idea of being on two levels, human and divine, is something that Saint Paul goes back to on other occasions. There is that very famous passage in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, which people often have as a lesson at funerals. Talking about the resurrection, to which we look forward in the creed, he asks, 'How are the dead raised?' Saint Paul makes a distinction between earthly life and heavenly, celestial, spiritual life.

'There are ... celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another.' (1 Corinthians 15:40)

It's a challenging concept for that baby to be, on one level, just another human baby, and on another level, to be the son of God. These are familiar words to us, but supposing we were men from Mars, we might be brought up short and ask a lot more questions than perhaps we are inclined to do, because the Christmas story is so familiar to us.

For instance, what does it mean, to be the son of God? You will recall that there was a huge controversy in the early church because of the teachings of Arius that, if Jesus was the son of God, he was somehow created by God and therefore he could not be God himself. So even today, some people, when they say the Nicene creed, in the communion service, when they get to 'I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father and the son, who with the father and son together is worshipped and glorified..', when they get to that bit, they miss out the words 'and the son' (in Latin, 'filioque') because they think that it implies that there is a kind of hierarchy with God at the top and the son in the position of a dependent creature.

Too much detail, you might say. Surely there is a way of understanding the godhead, as it is called, which simply says that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, are one in heaven - in the celestial world, as St Paul puts it. The baby in the manger represents and is part of the earthly world, but in the miracle of Christmas that baby is also of God and in God - and is God.

We say that God is all-powerful, all knowing; 'immortal, invisible, God only wise': the creator, the unmoved mover. But all those things are rather dry concepts. They are not what you would expect would produce the warm glow of goodwill which comes over us all at Christmas, and has

been coming over us for the last 2000 years, at this time of year.

There is a temptation to see this miraculous time as a sort of get-out-of-jail card. People rejoice that Christmas is a time of goodwill and happiness. Somehow through our focussing on that baby and all the happy baby things that must have been going on in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, just as they were in Saint Michael's Hospital, Bristol a month ago, our minds are able to be diverted from the harsh realities of the human condition.

People were singing carols in the market place in Kingston: and at the same time terrible things were still going on in the Middle East, in Syria, in Aleppo in particular.

Under our noses, on Friday in the Foodbank, we provided food for over 50 people, all living within a 3 mile radius of this church, because those people, in the midst of plenty, did not have enough money to buy food.

The NHS is recommending that hospitals cancel all routine operations over Christmas, because they have not got enough money to pay for the doctors, the nurses, the operating theatres and so on. This is despite our being in the fifth richest country in the world.

In this borough, Elmbridge, we have so far welcomed – how many refugees, do you think? Well, I'll tell you, none. Although 30 years ago we welcomed a lot of people fleeing from the war in former Yugoslavia, so far we have not welcomed any Syrians, even though thousands of them, including hundreds of unaccompanied children, were huddled in the camp in Calais, 70 miles away, for months.

By contrast, just up the road from here, in Woking, they are committed to taking 12 families a year for the next five years. They already have their first five families. So it is not the case that nobody can do anything.

Life goes on, life is gritty and challenging. It's the world that the earthly baby inhabits. Look at what Mary said, in the face of all this. She also faced both up, to heaven - and down, to earth.

'My soul doth magnify the Lord; and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my saviour.
For he hath regarded: the lowliness of his hand-maiden.'

So far, what you might expect. Mary looks up: she is grateful to God, who has singled her out. But then she looks down, to the problems on earth. And what she says could almost be a revolutionary manifesto!

'. .. he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.' (Luke 1)

Mary and Joseph spent two years on the run from the Egyptians. They were effectively refugees themselves. And yet: there were those angels, and the shepherds, and the wise men. All that wonderful Christmas story.

It is a special time. Heavenly, and earthly too. Glory to God on high, and in earth peace and food for the poor, and justice for the afflicted. A humble refugee baby - and a heavenly babe, in a carol.

I pray that this Christmas it will be heavenly, but also heaven on earth, for you and for all those you love, especially babies. Even among the nappies.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant