

Christmas I December 27, 2009

Here's a good question for this time of year; when does the Christmas story begin? It's an interesting question, and one that, surprisingly, gets us to some really exciting parts of the New Testament—the genealogies. I even copied them and included them in the bulletin. Both Matthew and Luke have genealogies of Jesus, that trace his background and his roots. (These are, I am pleased to note, the only 'begats' in the whole New Testament.) (Yes, there will be a test.) Like most of the genealogies in the Bible, they are told more to make a theological point than to give a precise family history. That's why they're all different, and why none of the genealogies in the Old or New Testaments, even those about the same people, match up exactly.

There are all sorts of really interesting things in these lists of Jesus', or Joseph's, progenitors; and if I had an couple of hours, I'd have a ball filling them in with all sorts of interesting details. (The reasons why they differ from each other are especially interesting.) But that's for a different day. Instead, I want to say a word about their scope—about where they begin and end.

Matthew begins with Abraham, the Father of Israel, the greatest of the Old Testament Patriarchs. From his perspective, that's as far back as you need to go to understand Christmas and Jesus. For Matthew, the Christmas story begins with Abraham, and God's call to Abraham to leave his homeland in Mesopotamia and be the father of a great nation. He begins here for good, theological reasons.

You see, as far as Matthew is concerned, the most important thing about Jesus is that he is the promised Messiah of Israel, the fulfillment of the promises of God given to Abraham and repeated and enriched by the words of the prophets. Jesus is Israel's true King. (That's why it's Matthew's Gospel that has the wise men, Kings from the East, worship the baby Jesus. The child is surrounded by his peers.)

His Gospel comes back to this theme again and again. So, for Matthew the Scribe, the faithful servant of Israel, the Christmas story goes back to Abraham, and the founding of Israel.

Then we have Luke, who does things differently, and for different reasons. Notice that Luke's genealogy, besides being 'backward' from Matthew's, begins somewhere else. He begins with Adam, the father, not of Israel, but of all humanity. Now, either Luke was a gentile, or he held his Judaism a lot more loosely than Matthew. Sure, Luke would agree that Jesus was a descendent of Abraham, (it's right there in verse 34). But that didn't tell the whole story, or the best story, that Luke had to tell.

As far as Luke is concerned, the most important thing about Jesus is not that he was the Messiah to the Jews; but that he was the savior of the whole world, the son of God, who was sent to and for everybody—and especially those on the margins, those on the outside, those who were considered *other*, or *less*. You find this over and over in Luke's Gospel, and we'll be running into it a lot this year as we hear mostly Luke's Gospel. (That's why it's Luke's Gospel that has shepherds, who were near the bottom of the social ladder, worship the baby Jesus. The child is surrounded by his peers.) So, for Luke the universalist, the Christmas story goes back to Adam, and the founding of the human race. You have to start there, Luke is saying, if you want to understand Christmas and Jesus.

(Mark, by the way, doesn't have a birth story. Mark's Gospel is the first one written, and he just hadn't heard about this stuff. So he begins with the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist; and we can skip him this week.)

Then there's John's Gospel. John has a genealogy of Jesus, too. But it doesn't look much like a genealogy; and it's easy to miss because it's so short. We just heard it. John's whole genealogy is only two Greek words; words that he flagrantly stole from the Book of Genesis; but words that had more and deeper layers of meaning in Greek than they ever did in Hebrew. Those two Greek words are, 'Εν ἀρχῇ. We translate that 'in the beginning'; and that'll do. But it really means something more, and something a bit different, even from the same words in Genesis.

ἀρχῇ is one of the most ancient technical terms in Greek philosophy, going back way before Plato and Aristotle. It means the original principle, the foundational idea, the primordial stuff, or the first principle of the world. Creation didn't actually begin until the Arche was in place and operating. The same sort of notion was picked up in the Jewish wisdom tradition around the time John was written—so there is a whole lot of baggage with that little word. It almost means "before the beginning", or, certainly, "before anything happened".

And John uses this word for his genealogy, for his way of saying when the Christmas story begins. It begins before anything happens. Before creation; before Adam; before Abraham; before there was anything except God the Father. In that beginning was the Word. John says this because he is convinced that the most important thing about Jesus is that he is God—or, to be theologically precise, as John himself would doubtless demand—Jesus is the incarnation, the taking flesh, of who God is to us and for us. There's no denial here of Jesus' humanity, of what Matthew and Luke are saying, but for John, all of that is secondary, all of that is incomplete, all of that falls short of the full truth. (Note that in John's Gospel, in the beginning, Jesus isn't with Kings or shepherds—Jesus is with God. Once more, the Lord is surrounded by his peers.)

So, for John the mystical theologian, the Christmas story goes all the way back, back to before the beginning, back to the inner life of the very heart of God.

We live our these various perspectives every year. On Christmas Eve we always hear Luke's story of Jesus' birth, so we can be reminded that we and all humanity are given a savior—one who comes for everyone, one who comes to welcome especially the outsider and the outcast, but one whose lineage embraces each and every one of us, whose genealogy goes back even to Adam.

And on the second Sunday of Christmas we always hear parts of Matthew's story, so we can be reminded that we stand in continuity with Israel; and that the ancient prophecies have been fulfilled—that there is a new King in the line of David, a King of peace, whose genealogy goes straight back to Abraham.

But between those, on the First Sunday of Christmas, we always hear these words from John, 'in the beginning', so we can be reminded that the gift we receive is nothing less than the gift of God himself, that here, in the fullness of what it means to be a man, comes also the fullness of God to us, and for us.

All of these stories tell the truth, all of them point to what is real, and they must be taken together, in their wholeness, if we are even to begin to understand Christmas, and Jesus. For unto us is given a saviour, a king, and the very presence of God.