

I heard Polly Toinbee on the radio yesterday talking about Christmas dinner and brussels sprouts. She said there were things that she just couldn't believe in at this season: sprouts, the people who follow Downton Abbey and the Immaculate Conception. I want to speak about that - not Downton or the sprouts!

Why won't King Ahaz ask God for a sign? In the reading in Isaiah, he gives a reason that sounds religious, 'I will not put God to the test.' But God himself has told Ahaz to ask, so his refusal is a deliberate turning his back on what God is offering.

In the late 8th C BC, in the small kingdom of Judah, Ahaz, the king, is worried about the survival of his dynasty. He is afraid that his two neighbors in the north – Israel and Syria – will destroy his kingdom. They have already invaded and taken off captives, but failed to take Jerusalem. Ahaz awaits another attack and looks around for help. He decides to go to Assyria, a superpower with a highly aggressive foreign policy, and ask for help. The great prophet Isaiah is an advisor to king Ahaz. He is strongly against what the king intends to do.

Isaiah argues that the dynasty of David is not going to be preserved through playing power politics with Assyria, but only through trust in God.

The prophet comes to reassure King Ahaz that Jerusalem will not be captured by the coalition against him. But Ahaz refuses through fear and lack of trust. So Isaiah says, God will give a sign anyway - a woman pregnant with a child of promise. But also a sign that the Assyrian invasion will devastate Jerusalem.

It is this verse: "a young woman is with child and will bear a son whose name means that God is with us." - that is picked up in the reading from Matthew's Gospel and used as a prophecy about Jesus' birth.

The context in Isaiah does not suggest a miraculous birth. It is "a young woman [of whatever sexual experience] is with child and will bear a son whose name means that God is with us."

When the prophecy of Isaiah was translated from Hebrew into Greek in Alexandria the Jewish translators chose the word *parthenos*, which means "virgin" and kept the definite article - so 'a girl is bearing a son' becomes 'The virgin shall conceive...' Why did they do this? Perhaps because there was a tradition in the prophets to refer to the nation of Israel as "The virgin" ¹

¹ Is 37.22; Jer 14.17; 18.13,31.4 'O Virgin Israel' Lam1.15, Amos 5.2 etc

So it becomes a prophecy, by inserting a future tense, saying that “the Virgin Israel will give birth to Messiah.”² God’s promised One.

We need to face up to this ambivalence in the sign that God gives. Just like Ahaz.

Maybe our easy access to the meaning of Immanuel and our confident images of the nativity need to encounter the ambiguity in the sign that God is giving us. And we need to recognise that God is present in the twists and ironies of human history. The sign given goes beyond our self-interest and our presumptions and Christmas cliches - to God's eternal self consistency and the promise of hope. God, and God’s signs in this world, is bigger - and a lot more upsetting than we would wish.

We were watching a film the other night - part of the Christmas nostalgia: ‘To Kill a Mockingbird.’ Atticus Finch is talking to his son Jem after a particularly difficult encounter. He says: "There's a lot of ugly things in the world son. I wish I could keep them away from you but that ain't possible." And we know that this is true.

In the gospel Joseph found that this is so, “a lot of ugly things.”

We’ve been thinking, in the mid-week services, about paintings of the Annunciation. There are many early Italian paintings, depicting scenes from the life of the holy family - or at least part of the holy family. Joseph, by and large, is absent from these scenes, or else consigned to a shadowy position in the background. He peers out of the gloom, like a supporting actor. Raphael is an exception to this artistic norm, he gives Joseph a more prominent position in his compositions. But not even Raphael attempts to paint today's gospel of the annunciation to Joseph. There are no paintings of angelic messengers, "feathered through time" alighting in Joseph's sleeping mind. No depictions like that other Annunciation to Mary. Only an admonition not to be afraid, a confirmation of the agency of the Holy Spirit and an instruction about naming.

Why is there such a dearth? Perhaps there is a realisation that this appearing to Joseph is not such a crucial part of the story, not the focal point. The angel is not named, there are no heavenly choirs or huge stars. Instead, Matthew moves perfunctorily to what Joseph **did** as a result of his encounter: Joseph woke and did as the angel had directed, he took Mary home, he abstained from sex, he named the child.

In contrast to King Ahaz, who trusted in the god of political intelligence, Joseph puts his trust in the divine message and acts. Simply and immediately - at great personal cost- he confronts the sneers of his culture, the ignominy and laughter, to make a home for the Child and his mother. By forming a

² see J Blake Couey and D Saliers in *Feasting on the Word*, Yr A, Vol1: 74ff

relationship of love, against the odds, he makes room for God's action in the world.

Today's epistle talks about the "obedience of faith." It is for us to allow the action of God's Spirit into our muddled world.

And it is muddled. For some, it is about sadness in what their lives and relationships mean. Confusion and untidy disorder. Things we have prayed would not happen, have come anyway and may have been a great blessing. Things we have hoped for passionately have not come and we live with disappointment... This too is part of the Christmas scene.

Ahaz was wrong – we commemorate just how spectacularly wrong each Sunday. David's line did not die out. The virgin did produce a child – who will lead us (no doubt in unexpected ways) and will save us from our sins.

This is the season when we recognise the wild and unpredictable action of the Spirit amid the difficult decisions - and the things that happen to us that we did not decide. When we are told not to be afraid, are told to trust that God's care and love, amid all the confusion, is constant. A time when we are called to form relationships that allow God's message to be incarnated in the world.

And so, the virgin birth. Do I believe in it? No I don't believe that is possible. It is against all the laws of nature. If it happened it would be a miracle!