

# The Way Down is the Way Up

a sermon preached at the

## BLUE christMASS

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lections: Jeremiah 23:5-8; Matthew 1:18-25

The Christmas day gospel is always Luke's version. Apart from the insertion of just the picturesque half of the story of the Magi, <sup>1</sup> which is Matthew's unique contribution, the Christmas story for mass consumption is entirely St Luke's. Luke clearly wants the reader to be wowed, to be dazzled. Luke is the sole source of angelic choruses bursting the night sky, adoring shepherds magnanimously and bravely travelling from fields to Bethlehem, the inn with manger and sentimental animal tableau. Without Luke's gospel the shop windows and greeting cards would look altogether different.

Matthew's account, on the other hand, emphasises both the scandal and the danger of this birth, themes almost completely muted by Luke. Because of Matthew we know something about Joseph's struggle to overcome patriarchal shame, and the immense suffering which this birth inaugurates. What Matthew's gospel makes abundantly clear is that though this child is the sign that 'God is with us', <sup>2</sup> it is equally true that God's incarnating in human flesh is a colossal scandal. Mary is pregnant but Joseph her husband is not the father, <sup>3</sup> a cause for unthinkable shame in their ancient near eastern culture. <sup>4</sup> Matthew's genealogy – with that long list of 'begats' – makes it perfectly clear that the purity of Jesus' lineage as 'son of David', a pre-requisite for being 'Messiah', is scandalised five times – tainted by incest, harlotry, the impurity of a foreigner, adultery and murder – <sup>5</sup> and to top it all off, Matthew reveals that Jesus is neither Joseph's son, nor David's nor Abraham's! Furthermore, Jesus begets no son – a very strange son of Abraham indeed! And the story of Herod, only the pretty half told on the greeting cards, shocks us with the hasty night flight into exile of the holy family and the appalling wholesale slaughter of the Bethlehem innocents.

So from the very start of Matthew's story it is clear that the way down is the way up. This is not the Christmas story we may be accustomed to hearing, quite unlike the Christmas story of childhood and of marketing. But it is the Christmas story as *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangelion* gospel, good news, as Matthew understands that word. The whole enterprise works by scandal – the scandal of the moral failure of Jesus' paternity; the scandal of the religious failure of refugee family; the scandal of the political failure of innocent slaughter. The way up, into the new era of the Kingdom, the age of the Messiah, appears to be the way down into failure, suffering and loss. This is the scandal of scandals of course, the very reason why the Christmas story in the fullness of its truth is not popular, and certainly not marketable. Scandal, failure, suffering and loss turn out to be the beginning of new life, the dawning of the new creation, the new leap forward in human evolution, the age of the Messiah.

Matthew's birth story is, in effect, the whole of the gospel 'in little'. "Those who would find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." <sup>6</sup> "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 1:13-23 is the account of the murderous Herod and his slaughter of "all the male children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under" (verse 16).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 1:23

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 1:18

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 1:19

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 1:3 Tamar; 1:5 Rahab, Ruth; 1:6 Bathsheba

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 10:39; 16:25

take it.”<sup>7</sup> “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field.”<sup>8</sup> “Jesus began to teach them that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering... and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”<sup>9</sup> “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”<sup>10</sup> “For many are called, but few are chosen.”<sup>11</sup> “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”<sup>12</sup> This is the way of scandal, the way of great offence to everything we have come to believe out of ‘natural philosophy’ and what is ‘normal’ about the ways of the world.

The way up into the new human consciousness is the way down of suffering, loss and failure. Our losses, our failures, our grief and shame – these ‘blues’ which we feel so acutely, these unsought descents into our murky, shameful and frightening depths – these are the very means by which we are being initiated into the new consciousness which is Emmanuel, ‘God is with us’. The scandal of Joseph and Mary’s lives is the means by which they give birth to the Son of Humanity. Joseph experiences a numinous power in his darkness and scandalous failure, through the visitation of tremendous and extraordinary dreams. The scandal of our lives – whatever that is for each of us, whatever it is that we are conscious of tonight – this scandal is likewise the means by which we too are giving birth to the Son, in ‘the castle of our soul’.<sup>13</sup> This is the same scandal of St Paul, that persecutor of Christ who could come to say: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”<sup>14</sup> This is the mystery and the astonishing good news of Christ’s-mass. Not that there was once a birth in far-away Palestine, nor that there was once a divine child-come-saviour, but that God is with us, *with us* – that this same Divine is *coming to birth in us, through that which is scandalous to us*.

Christmas is the astounding and unbelievable good news – that the way down, through our own scandal, is the way up to the new humanity who is coming to birth in us! This is very good news indeed! Emmanuel. God is with us! The way down is the way up!

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 7:13

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 13:44

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-18

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 19:30

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 22:14

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 23:12

<sup>13</sup> Meister Eckhart, quoted in Kunkel F, *Creation Continues: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew*, New York: Paulist Press, 1987, p43.

<sup>14</sup> Galatians 2:20