

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Christmas 1B

31st December 2017

Galatians 4.4-7

Luke 2.15-21

The Extraordinary under the veil of the ordinary.

The extraordinary, veiled under the ordinary – that’s what St Luke’s account of the birth of Christ is about. But every now and then, the veil of the ordinary is lifted – and, as often as not, that lifting of the veil is signalled by angels.

So, what’s so ordinary about the story of Christ’s coming? Here are a few things: a Jewish girl, betrothed and pregnant at what we would consider a very young age: nothing strange there. And then a pregnancy about which we hear nothing extraordinary; the mother makes a trip at the beginning of it, to spend time with her elderly cousin, but safely returns to her home town after three months, and to the care of her betrothed husband. The next event we hear of isn’t so strange, either – a demand and imposition made by the bureaucracy of an unsympathetic government. That’s not so unusual: how many millions in the history of the world have been pushed around without regard to their welfare by the powers that be? How many mothers, even in advanced pregnancy, are even in this present day travelling against their will, spending too much of their time in queues, waiting to be registered, hoping for some rest and safety at the end of it all, yet heartlessly refused just such rest?

So a pregnancy, then which was all too ordinary. And then a child, as St Paul put it, ‘*born of a woman*’: well, aren’t *all* children born of women? But in this case, a Jewish boy – ‘*born under the law*’ (Galatians 4.4) – so, circumcised and named ‘*on the eighth day*’ (Luke 2.21). This is the way things are. And then his name – ‘Jesus’ (or rather ‘Joshua’): the name, St Matthew tells us which was ‘*given by the angel*’, and has the meaning about ‘the Lord is salvation’. So, it seems very special and significant to us. And yet, the scholars tell us, it was probably the sixth most popular masculine name among First Century Palestinian Jews – who tended to choose their sons’ names from a fairly limited pool of about 12 names altogether. So, on the face of it, nothing very extraordinary about the child’s name. Nor, necessarily, about him being laid in a manger at his birth; it had probably happened before. Many houses had people and animals living in close proximity – the human quarters sometimes not much more than a raised platform above the space where the animals were kept at night. There was a lot of warmth to be gained that way. As many of you probably know, the verse in Luke’s infancy narrative which says that Jesus was laid in a manger, ‘because there was no room for them in the inn’, could just as easily be translated, ‘because there was no room for them in the living quarters’. So, imagine a Bethlehem house, part of it probably formed from caves in the limestone of that region, full to bursting when many relatives came to stay because of the demands of registration. In such a full house, when a relative arrived unannounced with a wife who was very soon to be – if not already – in labour, no surprise if the animals’ quarters were the only place with a little bit of privacy for the birth, and manger the most convenient place to put the new arrival safely. And, *of course*, he was wrapped in swaddling bands;

people believed they helped to straighten an infant's limbs; it was the normal thing. So – as we know – something extraordinary was happening, but it was veiled by a lot of very *unsurprising* circumstances.

And yet, weren't just these unsurprising circumstances the ones by which the child was marked out by the angel-messenger who appeared to the shepherds? They were ordinary people, doing their normal thing, when something broke in upon them, and told them that a set of circumstances, all unsurprising in themselves - the child born in a busy town, the manger, the swaddling bands - which would mark out for them the most unexpected thing of all – the birth of Saviour, the Messiah, David's heir, in what was, after all, Bethlehem, David's own birthplace.

What did that mean to the shepherds? What might they have expected from such a person? Did any of them see or follow Jesus thirty years later – did they recognise him as the infant they'd been directed to go and see? Was he the sort of Messiah they might have expected? – we're simply not told any of that. Only that they went, and that what they told other people of their experience caused amazement at the time.

But what of the continuing witness – the one we do know was there 30 years later, to see the outcome of it all – Mary herself? She, too, had had her angelic visitation – the moment when the veil of the ordinary was lifted; and it was in her elation – as well no doubt, as in her fear and confusion, that she had visited her cousin Elizabeth. The older woman had confirmed the extraordinary message of the angel in her spontaneous welcome of the younger

woman as '*the mother of my Lord*' (Luke 1.43); they had sung together; Elizabeth had shared the story of her own extraordinary conception of the child in her womb; they had spent time together, till shortly before that child was to be born. But then, for Mary, apparently nothing else; no other in-breaking of glory or angels – just the remains of her pregnancy, and the difficult journey. For sure, Joseph had accepted Mary as his wife, and the coming child to be his own; this must have been confirming and comforting; but the ordinary circumstances of pregnancy and childbirth in difficult circumstances must have crowded in for her. God, it must have seemed, had quit the scene.

But then there were these shepherds, with their own story of how the veil had been lifted; how much of a surprise they must have been at the tail-end of an exhausting night! No wonder Mary remembered all this, and was set a-pondering. But the ordinary kept flooding over everything – so when she and Joseph did the customary thing, 40 days after the birth – of visiting the Temple with a small sacrifice to redeem their firstborn – it was a surprise again that two old people should burst upon them and prophesy about their child. They were, Luke tells us, amazed.

Mary's life henceforth was to be like this – long years of ordinary faithfulness, bringing up her son 'under the law'; doing with him and for him what was right for pious Jews. The sheer ordinariness of it all made it surprising – even hard and painful – when from time to time the veil was lifted: the child who treated the Temple as 'his Father's house'; the young man who left home, and went preaching, attracting huge crowds with his natural authority. Mary must sometimes have felt wrong-footed by it all. The memory of

extraordinary experiences, long before, had to be pieced together with what was happening in the here and now, what other people had witnessed to, and what she had been told at a time when the angel's message must have seemed almost too overwhelming to understand. And, as things got darker and more dangerous, all the darkness and fear to be pieced together with the intimations of wonder, too – promises with terrible warnings, glory and elation pieced together with that thing that parents dread most of all – the death of a child.

Mary was there to the end – or rather, to the new beginning. St Luke in Acts makes it clear that she would have been there at the events of the first Pentecost – a new and powerful visitation of that Spirit who had first come upon her quietly in a mysterious way when her Son was conceived.

None of us is Mary, and yet perhaps aspects of her life and experience may remind us of our own Christian journey: those times when the veil seems to have been drawn aside; when we've felt we've known the Lord and his action in our life with absolute clarity; but then the many years when we've just had to walk on in an ordinary life which tries to be faithful, but in which we've not always been able to understand. The times when we've made real mistakes; but also the times when other people's witness about what God was showing them has kept us going – has given us something to ponder. Maybe we've envied them their clarity – but we've known we just have to keep on to the end ourselves before, and await God's revelation in its own time. And, like Mary, we've kept on in the company of other believers. That is the Christian way.

And, under it all, what is the extraordinary truth that is working? It's the truth that God has sent salvation – even in this troubled world; he has made us his children, through the birth of Mary's child, he has visited us with his Spirit, and is still at work in us through him, and he has made us his heirs – heirs of a glory yet to be revealed.