

SERMON FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS at St Mary's

26.12.10

This week some of you may have seen the remarkable television series about the Nativity. The dramatisation of the traditional nativity narrative was powerful and original. One of the most dramatic sections was when Joseph realised that Mary was pregnant. He was, not surprisingly, overcome with intense anger about who was responsible. And his initial incredulity that the child was conceived through the action of the Holy Spirit was overwhelming. Mary explained that she had been told about this in a dream by an angel. But then Joseph also had a dream and he was told to take Mary as his wife, and that she would give birth to Jesus. Soon afterwards the wise men had a dream that they should not go and see Herod to say where they had found Jesus. And then Joseph had another dream: take Mary and Jesus to Egypt so that they may avoid Herod.

It is very striking that the word dream is found six times in Matthew's gospel and it does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament. Nevertheless the book of Revelation has often been viewed as inspired in part by dreams. Even so, the Christian tradition regards dreams with some suspicion: there has always been a tension between rationalism and inspiration. In the Old Testament the prophets and patriarchs received messages through dreams: the prophetic dream and the art of dream interpretation were two strong strands of life. That young men will see visions and old men dream dreams was for Joel one of the signs of the coming of the Lord. Yet there has always been caution over such activity, and uncertainty about the difference between visions and dreams. Tertullian and Augustine clearly saw significance in dreams. But the church as a whole has always been ambivalent: revelation through dreams to saints has been accepted while some dreams have been viewed as based on superstition or even demonic inspiration. And yet great writers such as Bunyan used the liberty of the dreamer to write about spiritual realms normally closed to the living.

The rise of rationalism during the middle ages tended to exclude dreams from serious theological discussion. Of course Freud and Jung revived great interest in analysing dreams, but more in order to identify repressed desire than as a means of divine communication. But the rise of the Pentecostal movement in the last century sought to revive the inspiration of the early church in the gift of prophetic dreaming. That activity continues strongly today.

Traditional societies, especially in Africa, regard dreams as a crucial part of conversion and of the call to ordination. It is important for us who live in a world of scientific rationalism, that those less touched by this find

that dreams are a potent channel for divine inspiration, offering warnings, secret information, and consolation to believers. Indeed I have met a number of people whose deep faith has been strongly nurtured by such experience.

Today's gospel contains other distinctive points, typical of the author of this gospel: the wickedness of a Jewish king, the providence of God and the intervention of God. Threats to the life of a saviour or hero soon after birth were very common in the ancient world. An example from the Old Testament is the birth of Moses and in the New Testament a threat to a child who will be a ruler is mentioned in Revelation 12.4.

Today's gospel emphasises that Jesus is God's son, miraculously conceived, destined for the highest office with God, and who will judge the world. It was a life prophesied by the prophets, including teaching in parables, healings, and death and burial. In a sense therefore, Jesus had to be preserved from destruction as an infant, just as Moses was: because of a dream Jesus fled to Egypt from Israel, while Moses did the reverse. The destruction was now in Israel where God's people were. It is worth noting too that both Jesus and the readers or hearers of the gospel would have been victims of the same persecution that led to the flight to Egypt.

Today's text highlights the great differences between the world of the evangelist and our own. He was almost certainly a teacher and a convert from Judaism, worshipping in a church where most people had recently undergone the same conversion. They would have been more immediately struck by the reference to prophecy than we may be, for these verses seem detached from their original context.

But what comes over powerfully is the writer's confidence in God and faith in Jesus. We may find some of the imagery quaint. But we may well also be struck by the way in which the author points out that as believers in a loving and forgiving God, we need also to recognise and seek to account for the existence of evil and of tragedies. Indeed, the church recognises evil and tragedy today as it remembers with thanksgiving the life and witness of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

Meanwhile, as we come to the start of a new year it is very good to be thankful for the blessings we have received this year. May I also make a suggestion? We have just been thinking about dreams and their spiritual significance. Dreaming is the chain of thoughts that usually occur during

sleep. But sometimes we dream consciously when we deliberately take our minds away from everyday things and allow ourselves to enter a realm where imagination, chance, understanding and freedom mingle. Much great artistic, scientific, literary, musical, psychological and, above all else, spiritual creativity occurs when we do that. Perhaps we might sometimes allow this to happen prayerfully so that God may enter our hearts and minds, and transform us with his presence and his grace.

Amen.