

Advent 4 (A)
Matthew 1:18-25
God's googly

It's not uncommon to describe Matthew's account of Jesus' birth as viewed through Joseph's eyes, whereas Luke tells it from Mary's perspective. While there's truth in that observation, it's not quite that simple.

Preceding the passage that we've just read is a detailed genealogy. It's the sort of thing that people enjoy researching, and they often discover some surprises in their ancestry. Mine for example, includes Barry Crump, early settlers who landed at Petone, a bigamist, and a clan of Jacobian Scots. But it doesn't conclude in quite the same way as that drawn up by Matthew. At first, this list of 'begats', which covers over 40 generations, seems rather boring, but a closer look reveals some remarkable inclusions. First, there are four women, which was completely contrary to the customary recital of a genealogy. What's more, those named include two prostitutes, two foreigners, and one adulteress. But there are more surprises. It begins with Abraham and, as expected, ends with Joseph, but then Matthew plays a trick on us – or in cricket parlance, he delivers a googly. The ball doesn't go where you expect it and spins the other way. At the last minute he tells us that Joseph isn't really the father of Jesus. So yes, it's Joseph's story, but not totally his story, and it's a story with some rather interesting dynamics to it.

One night, while Joseph is asleep, when his guard is down and he hasn't got control over things, he receives a message from an angel. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." This is a lot to take in, especially coming, as it does from an angel. Angelic messengers aren't everyday occurrences, and it challenges Joseph's normal assumptions and catches him unawares.

So, here's the first dynamic. According to Matthew, the birth of Jesus is out of the ordinary. It's beyond what we expect and understand. We naturally want to explain things – to give rational explanations for how and why things happen. It's why people try to explain Jesus' conception in various biological ways. But I think that's the last thing Matthew wants us to do. Rather, he wants us to be astonished and awe-struck, just as Joseph was. Christmas is a time to realise that God is doing something totally out of the ordinary. God is working outside the square. This is a baby ... and a wonder ... and a gift ... that's designed to move us beyond ourselves.

Matthew bowled a googly at the end of the genealogy because he wants to tell us that something new and extraordinary is happening, and this newness is somehow the result of God's Spirit at work.

The Spirit of God is working throughout the story of God's people – stirring things up and renewing things. The Spirit is at the very beginning creating all that is, and it will be God's Spirit that will renew all creation at some future point. Now it's God's Spirit that begins something new when the world is exhausted, when we're exhausted, when our imagination fails, when we feel despair and hopelessness. Matthew is telling us: God's Spirit is at work again, causing something utterly new and amazing in the world – causing a baby to be born who will change everything.

Here's another interesting dynamic. Names in the Bible are significant. They aren't given because they sound nice, but because they say something significant about the person. They point to the role this person will play.

The angel gives Joseph two names for the baby, and both hint at this new thing that God is doing. First,

the angel says, "You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." The Hebrew name *Jesus* is the verb *save* – to rescue, to deliver. Imagine on Christmas that we have a baby named *Save*, because that's what Jesus is about – saving people from sin and guilt, from death and self-destruction, from despair and hopelessness, from poverty, injustice, sickness, and hunger. These weeks of Advent, of waiting as another candle on the wreath is lit, is about being ready for the saving one who will come when we cannot save ourselves.

The other name the angel gives for the baby is *Emmanuel*, which means, *God is with us*. In Jesus God was present in the world – present in a new and transforming way. And in that presence, God was and continues to make things new – renewing us.

In the Gospels we're told that whenever Jesus showed up things were transformed. Where people were in need, he saved them – lepers, the deaf, the blind, the lame, the hungry, the unclean, the oppressed, the rejected, even the dead. His very presence makes new life possible. The church is a community of people who believe in a God who is always transforming – who is constantly, through the Spirit, making new and recreating, rescuing, and saving.

It seems to me that that would make us a people who are being constantly awe-struck by what God does in this world – by what God does for us and through us. That's what Matthew is saying: here is God who does the extraordinary – working outside the square. God comes to be with us, to share our lives and to save us – bringing hope where there is despair, joy where there is sadness, reconciliation where there is estrangement, light where there is darkness, life where there is death.

So here we are, near to Christmas, and Matthew prepares us by giving us an angel's message in a dream that's beyond our expectations. Sure, the message is to Joseph, but it's for us. The baby named *Save*, rescues us from all that prevents us knowing the love that *is* God and that God is with us. We're not alone – not in this life, not in death, not in life after death. God is present and active in our world, in our lives, often in very unexpected ways.

We're being invited to be awe-struck, to wonder and ponder, and to live in expectation. Our world (the big world and our personal world) may at times feel un-saveable, but what Christmas tells us, is that we're not abandoned, for God is with us. Here is God come to us when all human possibilities have run out, offering new and startling ways forward. So, how about living life with a new expectation – knowing that we aren't alone and that we live with a God who might well bowl a few googly's.

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