

SERMON FOR LAYREADERS CHRISTMAS EVE EVENSONG

Brian McKee

First Lesson:

Here beginneth the tenth Verse of the second Chapter of Zechariah.

“Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion: for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the LORD. And many nations shall be joined to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people: and I will dwell in the midst of thee, and thou shalt know that the LORD of hosts hath sent me unto thee. And the LORD shall inherit Judah his portion in the holy land, and shall choose Jerusalem again. Be silent, O all flesh, before the LORD: for he is raised up out of his holy habitation.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

Second Lesson:

Here beginneth the eighteenth Verse of the first Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: ““Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.... And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.””

Homily:

The Second Lesson on this Christmas Eve is perhaps the very key to being a believer in Jesus Christ. If we believe this Second Lesson, then we must also believe that Jesus Christ is truly the Incarnate Son of God. The subject of this evening’s Lesson goes to the very heart of the Christian Faith. If you believe this Lesson, then you are capable of truly being a Christian. If you do not believe this Lesson, then it is truly impossible for you to be a Christian.

Our main text this evening is as follows: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.... And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.””

All of the Gospel, the good news of Christ, rests on this basis. These two small verses are literally the foundation upon which Christianity is built.

In order to believe in everything else in the Gospels, we must first believe that Jesus Christ was the very Son of God, “Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary”, as we affirm when we repeat the Apostles’ Creed. For if Jesus were just a human being, then all the rest of the Gospel account is meaningless, including His death on Calvary’s hill. If Jesus were just another human being, then the crucifixion was a waste of time. If Jesus were not the Son of God, then we have no hope of everlasting life.

God required that a perfect sacrificial “Lamb” be sacrificed, and its blood shed to cleanse the sins of all the sinners of the world. No mere human could be perfect, so no mere human could be a satisfactory sacrifice. Only God is perfect, so God Himself had to provide the perfect sacrificial victim. So God sent His own divinely-conceived Son to be that perfect “sacrificial Lamb.” This we must believe if we are to call ourselves Christians.

I know many decent moral people -- some of who say that they believe in God, some of whom say that they believe that God was the maker and creator of the world -- but, yet, some of them say they believe Christianity is not true because they cannot believe in Christ's Virgin Birth. These people argue that it is impossible that a virgin could give birth. Perhaps they have forgotten that, with God, all things are possible!

It actually seems rather irrational to believe that a God capable of creating the massive universe, the solar system, the planets and moons, all wildlife, all plants, and all other creatures of creation, could make and create all this; and, yet, could not cause one virgin to give birth. After the enormous accomplishment of Creation out of nothing, it seems to me that having a virgin conceive and give birth would have been a very small matter, especially to an Almighty and All-Powerful God!

Science indeed backs up the possibility of a virgin birth. There are certain organisms, including some frogs, that can reproduce by division, requiring only one parent, and no physical coming together by two beings in any kind of mating. True science will always confirm the actions of God the Creator, because God is also the creator of true science.

More importantly than science, faith is actually the key. Christ's Virgin Birth is just the first of many Holy Mysteries that together make up the Christian Faith. If we have faith, then we can become the children of God. If we do not have faith, no logic or educated arguments of any kind will convince someone to believe.

The Virgin Birth is documented in today's Second Lesson from St. Matthew and also in the Gospel of St. Luke, in the first chapter, verses 26-38. If we have faith, then these two Scriptures are all that we need to know. Let us hear and ponder the words of St. Luke 1:26-38:

“And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed are thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall

give unto him the throne of his father David. And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

And, behold thy cousin Elizabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her."

Following this scripture about the Annunciation to St. Mary of Christ's conception and upcoming birth, St. Mary sang a song of praise that is called the Magnificat. We sang or said the Magnificat earlier tonight in our Office of Evensong. Faith was necessary for the Blessed Virgin Mary. St. Mary had faith in the Archangel Gabriel's promise to her. She agreed to be the mother of the Son of God, through unquestioning faith in God's word as given to her by the Archangel Gabriel. In agreeing to this, she literally risked her life. Being found "with child" by anyone except her betrothed and unmarried could mean her being accused of adultery. The punishment for adultery was to be stoned to death.

St. Mary had no idea that God would appear to St. Joseph, her fiancé, in a dream to prevent this from happening. She simply trusted the angel, in a beautiful example of true, unquestioning faith. How many women today would believe in such an angelic message as did St. Mary? Likewise, St. Joseph was an example of faith. He trusted in the appearance of an angel in his dream. He accepted the message from the Lord that the child was conceived of the Holy Ghost, and that St. Mary had not broken her vows of engagement. How many men today would believe such a thing revealed to them in a dream as did St. Joseph?

Both SS. Mary and Joseph are prime examples of how we should have faith in God's words to us. Let us take the Scriptures tonight, with true faith, and truly go into the world telling all that Jesus Christ, the very Son of Almighty God, was born!

Recall these familiar words from a familiar old hymn:

"Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head.

The stars in the sky look down where he lay,
the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.”

Merry Christmas! And as Tiny Tim observed, may God bless us all, everyone!

Let us pray:

Almighty God, our Loving and Gracious Father, who sent Thine only-begotten Son into the world to be born of the Virgin Mary in a simple stable: give us true faith to believe the words of Holy Scripture with unquestioning resolve, just as St. Mary and St. Joseph believed with unquestioning faith the messages given unto them by Thine angels. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, and compassionate Good Shepherd, who was born this night in Bethlehem long ago. *Amen.*

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1 Brian McKee, OSL, is Prior of the Southeastern Ohio Chapter of the Order of St. Luke (UMC) and Organist, Cantor, and Lay Reader in a mission of the Anglican Catholic Church.

2 Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xi (PECUSA 1928/1943).

3 Zechariah 2:10-13 (KJV).

4 Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xi (PECUSA 1928/1943).

5 St. Matthew 1:18-25 (KJV).

6 St. Matthew 1:18 & 21 (KJV).

7 St. Matthew 1:18 & 21 (KJV).