

Sermon - Joachim & Anna

Based on: Luke 2.1-7; and the Gospel of James

Encountering unexpected stories

- Six years ago I had the privilege of visiting parts of Italy and France.
- I enjoyed walking in the mountains and seeing the wild flowers there.
- I also ended up visiting quite a few old churches, and appreciating the paintings, carvings, sculptures, and so on - and by old, I mean churches that were built five hundred, one thousand or even fifteen hundred years ago.
- One particular aspect piqued my curiosity: there were often a series of depictions of aspects of the life of Christ, from his birth and baptism, to his death and resurrection, and there were sometimes scenes from before his birth.
- I puzzled over these, because they were usually of an older couple embracing, and then bringing a little girl to the temple, before continuing with what was obviously Joseph being betrothed to Mary, and the angel Gabriel visiting Mary to announce her part in God bringing his Son into the world.
- I did some online research, and discovered that these first scenes depicted Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, and some traditions concerning them and Mary's early life.
- Well, as a good Protestant, I was a little indignant, because this was not in the Bible!
- Part of the Protestant reformation was the cry of *Sola scriptura!* - by Scripture alone! - which meant that we should only regard what we find in the canonical Bible as being all-sufficient for the Christian faith, with no added extras.

Adjusting perspectives

- However, there were a few things that had opened my eyes to viewing such matters with a more relaxed mindset.
1. Firstly, I had long experienced divine revelation through writings other than the Bible - even in contemporary fiction, and indeed through conversations, art, and in nature, and so I'm open to God also engaging with us through ancient church traditions that are not in the scriptures.
 2. Secondly, I had learned that the canonical New Testament was only finally determined in the fourth century AD and that a number of books and texts didn't make the final cut.
 - And that just because those texts were regarded as being not in accord with orthodoxy, we should at least acknowledge that amongst early church communities these texts had been important to them in their faith development and expression.
 - One of these books was the apocryphal *Gospel of James*, written in Greek around 150 AD, and is now thought to have been written as a response to Christian sects that were denying that Jesus was fully human
 - The *Gospel of James* helps to fill out the background story of Mary, and describes her parents, Joachim and Anna, and the circumstances of Mary's conception and childhood.
 - There were additional aspects that influenced my thoughts at the time.
 3. One was that my son's partner was pregnant, and I was very much looking forward to becoming a grandparent myself for the first time.
 4. The other was experiencing a Catholic church service in Ravenna - a family service on a Sunday morning.
 - While the priest was leading the main body of the congregation through the liturgy, there was a lot of bustling along one of the side aisles, as *nonnas* - assisted by different generations of their offspring - were setting up plates of cakes and various delicacies for a feast after the service.
 - It appeared that they were getting ready to celebrate being family together - the church family comprising of families of grandparents, parents, young adults, children and babies.

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Grandparents

- With all of these thoughts, it occurred to me that of course church communities don't want to limit the celebration of Jesus' family and upbringing to just Mary, along with Joseph.
- That it makes complete sense to ask 'What about Jesus' grandparents? Didn't they also have an influence in how Jesus was raised, in his faith development, in his understanding of right and wrong, and in the fundamental aspects of his world view?'
- As the years pass, I gain more and more insight into my parents' legacy within myself and my siblings, and in turn how their parents - my grandparents - influenced them.
- I wear a symbol of that influence on my right hand: my grandmother's wedding ring; the one who I was named after - my second name was her maiden name.
- She has had a distinct impact upon me, in spite of dying before my parents were married.

Engaging with a non-canonical story

- So today while we are observing the festival of Mary, mother of our Lord, it seems appropriate to particularly note Mary's parents.
 - We know that Mary, along with Joseph, was a remarkable person.
 - Her role and influence on Jesus, and then the early church, was profound.
 - Her own parents in turn would likely have been exceptional people, and quite possibly had a hand in helping to raise Jesus to be the person he was.
 - Before I give a summary of their story, I'd like you to bear a few things in mind about the stories we find in the gospels - particularly the nativity stories of Jesus as related in Matthew's and Luke's gospels, such as today's gospel reading.
1. Firstly, the Bible itself has a tradition of infancy narratives - the circumstances of the birth of notable leaders such as Jacob who became Israel, Moses who led the Israelites through the wilderness, Samson the judge, and Samuel the prophet and king-maker.
 - Their births and early years were all significant enough to have these stories included in the Old Testament - and so the story of Mary's nativity conforms to this Biblical tradition.
 2. Secondly, the gospels were written more than seventy years after the birth of Jesus, and so any stories from then would have been from the well developed and reliable oral tradition of the time.
 - Thus, any stories written only another seventy years after that could likewise have been sourced from the same oral tradition.
 - While we cannot state confidently that Joachim and Anna's story was true, we also cannot state that it was *not* true.
 3. Thirdly, while some aspects of Joachim and Anna's story might seem a bit odd, there are many odd stories that we accept as part of our canonical scriptures: for example, when the prophet Elisha was jeered at by a group of boys and called 'Baldy!', he cursed them in the Lord's name and they were then mauled by bears. (*cf. 2 Kings 2.23-24*)
 - Stories like that make us think a bit harder about how we understand scripture, and how we might engage effectively with the meaning underlying it.
 - We can take the same approach with stories that might not be canonical, but which are part of church tradition.

Joachim and Anna's story

- So here's a summary of the story of Joachim and Anna.
- They were a devout couple, and had a habit of giving one third of their income to the temple for the use of the priests, one third to help the poor and needy, and keeping one third for their own needs.
- For twenty years they remained childless, but prayed earnestly for a son, who they then promised to the Lord if their prayers were answered - just like Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist's parents had done.

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- After a priest had rejected Joachim's offering because he was childless, and therefore deemed to be cursed by God, Joachim spent forty days fasting in the wilderness as penance.
- At the end of this time he was given a vision of angels, who assured him that he and Anna had been childless not because they had sinned, but in order that God's glory might be revealed.
- He was promised that Anna would bear a child - but a girl instead of a boy, who should be named Mary.
- At the same time that Joachim was being visited by angels, Anna, who was grieving the absence of her beloved husband, was given the same vision, and instructed to journey to Jerusalem to meet him there.
- They met at the Golden Gate - also known as the Gate of Mercy - the eastern gate of the Temple Mount of Jerusalem, and traditional icons depict Joachim and Anna embracing each other there.
- Their child was born, and after Mary was weaned they fulfilled their vow to the Lord, even though she was a girl rather than a boy: they presented her at the temple where she supposedly stayed until Joseph was betrothed to her.

Joachim and Anna's patronage

- Saints Joachim and Anna, and the birth of Mary, are even mentioned in the Islamic scriptures, the Koran, and they continue to be celebrated within the Catholic church.
- The story of Mary being presented at the temple has even been acknowledged by the establishment of two religious orders: the *Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, started in Ireland, and then copied by the *Congregation of Presentation Brothers* - both of which established many schools.
- My younger son attended the College of the Presentation in Reading, Berkshire for a while, and I found it confusing that the painting in the school's foyer was of an older couple presenting a girl, rather than as I had expected, a picture of Joseph and Mary presenting the infant Jesus at the temple: different presentation!
- The first church to be named after St Anna - or St Anne - was built in the 6th century, and many churches and other concepts have been named after her.
- For example, in Imperial Russia one of the leading state decorations was the Order of St Anne, and in Malta our galaxy, the Milky Way, is called *It-Triq ta' Sant'Anna*, literally '*The Way of St Anne*'. (Some trivia, perhaps useful for a quiz one day!)
- More locally, there is a primary school in Carrum Downs, a suburb south of here, named after St Joachim - another example of contemporary and local acknowledgement of one of these saints.
- Both Joachim and Anna are regarded as the patron saints of a variety of different aspects of human life and endeavour, but together they are seen as most obviously the patron saints of grandparents, with their specific feast day being 26th July.

Giving thanks for the generations

- So as someone who is blessed to be a grandfather, I delight in the story of these grandparents of Jesus.
- The presumed warmth and intergenerational affection between Joachim and Anna, Mary and Joseph, and Jesus their grandson and son respectively, is a reminder of the legacy that is passed on from one generation to another.
- This is as much true for the faith life of church communities as it is for individuals.

- May we both acknowledge and give thanks for the blessings we have received from those who have preceded us, both personally and in this community.
- May we also be mindful of the blessings we can pass on to those who will succeed us, again both personally and in this community.
- And let us celebrate both grandparents and grandchildren - whether our own or those we know - even as we give thanks to God for Joachim and Anna's daughter Mary, who was in turn the mother of their grandson, our Lord Jesus Christ.