

SERMON AT YORK: 19/12/99: GEOFF CHADWICK: ADVENT 4: LK 1:26-38

“BIRTH NOTICES”

I wonder if you've ever read the birth notices in the paper? Here are a few:

X and X are proud to announce the safe arrival of Y on DATE. Many thanks to the staff of HOSPITAL. Weight and Length.

To X and X a son, born NAME on DATE. Bother to Y. Thanks to A and B.

“And now you [Mary], will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:31-34, NRSV).

That's some sort of birth notice – or should I say pre-birth notice!

This birth notice –which announces the conception of Jesus - captures our imagination every year. It's a notice which announces more than a simple birth. It's a notice which announces the culmination of the hopes and dreams of the Hebrew people over centuries. Finally there would be an ancestor to King David who would rule as God over them forever!

Here we read not just about who the parents are (Jesus' weight and length aren't mentioned – nor is the hospital for that matter – I think it was the manger Inne?), we read about the future aspirations of Jesus. We hear of his career even

before he is born. This is a special child indeed. None of us can claim to have known our careers before we were born – some of us didn't even know when we left high school – but here in the Scriptures the extraordinary nature of the Christ child is announced from the very beginning. This may be a literary device so that the context of the rest of the gospel story is made clear from the start. It may even be a poetical device to help create an air of expectation around the birth story of Jesus. And guess what it works!

The story of the annunciation to Mary of the conception of Jesus is one which draws us out of the mundane into the mystery of God's surprising way of operating. This birth notice reads nothing like the typical sort of birth notice we see in the paper. This birth notice makes us take notice. It is an announcement which makes us want to know more about this child who is to be born. This notice, placed at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, is an invitation to read further. To find out more about the life of the Jesus who is to be called Christ.

This, in fact, is what the season of Christmas is like. Christmas is an invitation into a life-long study into the life of Jesus. It is a time where, captivated by the extraordinary birth of God in human form, we desire to give meaning to that birth in our own lives. Christmas is the birth notice, but the rest of the year is time to grow alongside the Christ child.

It is a sad thing than in today's commercialised world Christmas will be forgotten as soon as Boxing Day arrives. The tinsel and glitter will be put away, New Year will come but it will be just like the old one. The baby Jesus will not be taken out of his crib, the meaning of his whole life will not be explored, and the continuing work of his Spirit will be ignored – or will it?!

In the coming year there will be those baptised in the name of Christ, there will be those married with Christ's blessing, there will be those buried in the name of Christ, and there will be those who give their allegiance to Christ. There will still be those who are captivated by that extraordinary birth notice – but not just the birth notice – but the life of the one it hails!

May you continue to be so captivated!

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.