

MATTHEW 1: 18-25 (Fourth Sunday in Advent)

A Crossing

Robert W. Bertram

[A Crossings Workshop in Buffalo, NY, October 26, 1998]

This is one of the most controversial texts in the gospels, dwelling as it does on Jesus' so-called virgin birth. (It's probably more accurate to speak of his virginal conception.) And if that weren't already politically incorrect enough, what's worse is that the text features not Mary, the real heroine, but Joseph, "poor" Joseph, as if he were the one with the big worry, and he the hero who comes through after all. But that Matthean upstaging of Mary by Joseph may already tell us something about her. It certainly tells us something about us, females and males alike, who all may be more like him than like her at least in one respect.

The half-dozen questions which follow won't be truly open questions. They're leading questions. They're meant to lead us down through The Problem in this text, all the way down until we've shown how profoundly "necessary" is the biblical Christ. And then, once we've hit bottom – drained the swamp, so to say – we'll ask our way back up, up through the text's Solution, to show how this Christ does in fact meet our (Josephian) necessity. In that way we'll be tricking out the whole Diagnosis/Pro-Gnosis sequence gradually, not all at once but a step at a time. Else it's like trying to drink from a fire hose.

THE PROBLEM (Dia-Gnosis)

1) Initial Diagnosis.

First, I assume that Joseph's most glaring problem was that his fiancée was pregnant, no thanks to him. The text records that already before Mary and he "came together, she was found to be with child," (v. 18b.) Is the sheer fact of this problem pregnancy – a fact no one denies, as far as I know – our problem, too? Else it would be hard to make a "crossing" out of it, from Joseph to us. If it is our problem as well, do you see us somehow caught between the same two alternatives to which Joseph was limited? (v. 19)?

2) Advanced Diagnosis.

Next, we move from Joseph's problem as an outward fact to his internal problem. The angel spots it as "fear" (v. 20), the sort of fear which Matthew elsewhere describes as unfaith. So afraid, so unbelieving is Joseph – as who wouldn't be! – that he hadn't even considered the third alternative the angel proposes (to take Mary home with him as his wife), let alone the angel's preposterous explanation (the fetus had come from the Holy Spirit.) Presented with the angel's statement, we too are incredulous. But afraid, afraid to believe?

3) Final Diagnosis.

Finally, if Mary's baby was allegedly conceived by the Holy Spirit and by no man, wasn't that already more than enough for poor Joseph to swallow, just at the level of biology? But no, biology is not the worst of it. He's expected to believe that this whole virginal conception is necessary for people's salvation, that that's how badly off they are. If the "God-with-

us” is really going to be with us, fallen sinners, and still be God, then this “Emmanuel” dare not be the offspring of just another sinner. For that’s exactly what this Emmanuel is coming to “save” sinners “from,” “their sin.” So Joseph could not dismiss the virgin birth on merely biological grounds. That would’ve been too easy. He confronted a whole incredible soteriology as well.

Putting it bluntly, the angel’s announcement sounds like an insult not only to Joseph’s intelligence but to his very self-worth. For the baby to be properly conceived, an outside Donor will have to be brought in, “the Holy Spirit,” since Joseph cannot be trusted to beget his own son. How humiliating! What he must have been tempted to tell the angel was not just, “Look, I know how babies are made,” but rather, “That desperate we are not, to need my paternity and my whole patriarchal ancestry bypassed.” The announcement gave Joseph far more to disbelieve than just “the virgin birth.” If he had a disbelieving bone in his body he must’ve shrugged, “Who needs it?”

And come to think of it, isn’t that the question exactly? Who needs it? Joseph isn’t the only one being humbled. How fitting for Advent – for us.

THE SOLUTION (Pro-Gnosis)

4) Initial Prognosis.

If that finally is how the text diagnoses us, by so humiliating us as to make the virgin birth what we need as sinners, isn’t that likewise where the text does the very opposite: begins our recovery? The Solution commences at the very pit of our humiliation, not before, except that now the humiliation is no longer ours alone. Not even ours first of all. Look who is now humbled in our place: “God with us.” That this God should ever

have been an offspring in the first place, a dependent God, when any proper God would stick to being The Supreme Parent on whom everything else depends, and that this Child God should furthermore become a human infant with all the dependence, the indignity, yes the mortality this incurs, and that on top of that he should then be so vulnerable as to need a stepfather like Joseph to adopt him and provide him a cover of respectability – all this seems at first glance to be so unbecoming of God as to be degrading. At first glance. How about at second glance?

5) Advanced Prognosis.

Perhaps even more remarkable than Emmanuel's humiliation/exaltation for us is that Joseph believed it and, believing it, acted on it. In one of Luther's Christmas sermons he quotes Saint Bernard to the effect that the angel's Announcement to Mary entailed three miracles: that God becomes a human being, that he is born of a virgin, and that she is able to believe that. Of those three, the miracle which most astonished Luther was the third. Similarly, within the short space of our gospel lesson we watch Mary's husband undergo the same wondrous change from a merely "just

man," yet afraid to believe, to a heroic "son of David" whose faith must have been tested unimaginably, and not just on the subject of Mary's virginity.

You and I've known others like that, none of whom had the benefit of Joseph's nocturnal angel. Still, they did claim to have the Holying Spirit, the same Donor Parent who conceived Emmanuel. For ordinary believers, that's not bad ancestry, would you say?

6) Final Prognosis.

Our Prognosis climaxes where our Diagnosis began, out in our overt behavior, in the world of observable fact. We had said that Mary's out-of-wedlock pregnancy might embarrass Christians today into treating it much the way Joseph was tempted to: not to repudiate it outright but, as he was inclined to do with Mary, "to dismiss [it] quietly." (v. 19) But then the text went on to create a new, third alternative, at least for those of faith: bring Mary home with us as our own, embrace her publicly as the Mother of "our" Child – Matthew does call him "the Son of [all] Humanity" and he is after all our brother – and be proud that he adopts our lowly family names and family histories as his own when we know full well Who it is who really conceived him.

But what if skeptics start asking nosy questions about his virgin birth? I'd suggest, pursue their questions only if they're nosy enough, that is, nosy not just about the biological embarrassments but the soteriological embarrassments as well, and embarrassing not only to us but to God, God-with-us, the God who would stoop so low to save people from their sins. If on the other hand the skeptics (or their counterparts, the biblicists) refuse to get that nosy, I'd just tell them nicely, "Sorry, it's a family secret." Still, there may be a very different, better response than that. What do you advise?

RWB

Buffalo, 10/26/98

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