MCCIA Bible Study: The Nativity of Jesus (Matthew)

The MCCIA Bible Study series on the nativity of Jesus began on Wednesday 25 August, led by the Rev. Sara Bishop, of the Welsh Church. This was held via Zoom. Her presentation was recorded and is available with this account.

She emphasized that we use many different lens to read the bible and broke down four, the historical, literary, devotional and theological, providing a short list of the kinds of questions that the different lens throw up. Each of these offers different means of opening this book of faith and exploring it from a different angle.

Matthew’s gospel is history, provided that we allow for a broad definition of history. It is testimony to what happened. We need to be careful that we do not allow ourselves to be too distracted by the historical question as to what actually happened, which tends to reduce the possibilities to the kind of event with which we are familiar. The gospels are testimony to unusual events!

Matthew places the birth of Christ in the long context of Jewish history and frames it in a literary manner that reaches back into Jewish prophetic writing to do so. He is concerned to show that Jesus is the Son of David, and so stands in the line of those favoured by God, as was David. This is the point of the long genealogy, with its curious conclusion that Jesus is the son of Joseph (even though we know better!). The genealogy of Jesus, with its showing of non-Jewish contributors and also the inclusion of women is important in establishing the humanity of Jesus.

Matthew buttresses this claim with many examples of the fulfilment of prophecy. The first such example is from Isaiah 7:14, ‘Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel’. This is now applied to Jesus. This prophecy was applied at the time of Isaiah to the political situation of Israel in face of external threats. Sara emphasised that, for Matthew, Jesus is the embodiment of the Jewish law.

The devotional and theological approaches to reading scripture are both very common and very personal. Each denomination will have their own special emphases, and there is joy in the fact that we can read each other’s approach and have our eyes and ears opened to hear, in ways that we would not have previously.

We discussed prophecy and dreams and speaking with angels, things that we don’t easily understand, which makes it a challenging place for us to stop and reflect. We can at least see that it means that the large claims that Matthew is making for Jesus are referenced in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prominence of dreams is also of interest. God spoke to Joseph in a dream, but this was sufficiently authoritative for the family to flee to Egypt. The question of the relationship between dreams and prophecy was raised. It was eventually decided that they occupied similar space, but that dreams were more immediate and personal, while prophecy was more long-term and public.

We are very grateful Sara Bishop for this bible study!

The second bible study will be led by the Rev. Carolyn Francis, of the Collins Street Baptist Church, on Luke ’s account of the birth of Jesus. It will also be via Zoom, on Wednesday 8 September.