

Christmas Communion 2017

Isaiah 52.7-10 John 1.1-14

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Every birth is a miracle. The mistake we sometimes make is to think of a miracle as a breach of and an exception to the laws of nature. But that's not what a miracle is. A miracle is something wondrous, something amazing; an event that goes so far beyond our expectations and explanations that our jaws drop and we can but look on in silent astonishment. So every birth is a miracle; the arrival of a new life into the world, the moment when the new born child draws its first breath and utters its first cry, and its parents look at one another and ask, "Did we make this?". Well, yes and no. The life of a new born always comes as gift, as miracle.

Every birth is a miracle, but some births are more clearly miraculous than others. On 22nd November of this year, a child was born at Glenfield Hospital in Leicester by caesarean section, a daughter to Naomi Findlay and Dean Wilkins; and they named her Vanellope Hope Wilkins. She was described in the press as a 'miracle child', and with good reason. When Naomi had her routine scan at nine weeks pregnant, the child in her womb was discovered to have a rare condition called 'ectopia cordis'; what this meant was that her heart and part of her stomach were growing outside her body. The chances of survival seemed impossibly remote and a termination was advised.

I don't believe that any of us are in a position to stand in judgement of parents faced with such a situation or dilemma. Others may have made a different decision, but Vanellope's parents chose to persevere with the pregnancy. Within an hour of her birth, the little girl had the first of three operations to move her heart into her chest. The surgery was successful. It is thought that Vanellope was the first baby in the UK to survive with this condition.

A miracle child; and of course the miracle was in large measure a miracle of medical science, a testimony to the extraordinary skill and dedication of the surgeons and other experts and carers. When it comes to miracles, we do not have to choose between what is human and what is divine, what is natural and what is supernatural. All is of God, and we can but stand in awe and wonder.

And so, from one miracle child to another, to the one whose birth it is we celebrate tonight: Jesus, born of Mary, born in a stable in Bethlehem; Jesus, whom Christians acclaim as Son of God and Saviour of the world.

Every birth is a miracle, a gift of life; but if the birth of Jesus is more of a miracle than others, then perhaps the reason many would give is that Jesus, according to the testimony of the Gospels, was born of a virgin mother. It defies our scientific understanding; as Mary said to the angel who brought the news, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

And yet, as extraordinary as this is, and to modern minds perhaps incredible, it is not the virginity of his mother that makes the birth of Jesus a miracle, a thing of wonder. It is not even, in itself, the baby lying in a manger; but rather the man whom that child would grow to become, Jesus, the Messiah, God's chosen, who died for us and rose again. We celebrate Christmas because of Jesus; we do not worship Jesus because of Christmas. The miracle is in who Jesus is and what he did; in the words of Saint Paul, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself". There lies the wonder, the miracle.

Questions of biology, of "How can this be?" as a question of science, I suspect are missing the point. The Gospels do not speak of the virgin birth as some kind of proof of the divinity of Jesus, but rather as the fulfilment of an ancient promise. St Matthew quotes words spoken by the prophet Isaiah, first uttered some 800 years before the birth of Jesus, "'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means 'God with us'."

In the original Hebrew, the word, 'virgin' could equally be rendered 'young woman'. The emphasis is not on the mode of conception, but on what this birth means. It is a sign; and above all a sign of hope. It tells us that, whatever the appearances, God has not abandoned his people. In the cry of a new born child, we are to hear the sound of life, of hope. God is with us, and always will be.

So tonight we celebrate the miracle of a birth, of a child who is named twice over. Joseph is told "you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins"; but also, "they shall name him Emmanuel", God with us. Names matter, because they speak of meaning.

The parents of this year's miracle child, Vanellope Hope Wilkins, explained to reporters why they named their daughter as they did. They called her Vanellope after a character in a Disney film, Wreck it Ralph: Naomi, her mother, said, "Vanellope in the film is so stubborn and she turns into a princess at the end, so it was fitting. The Hope part is the fact that she has brought hope to us, and my mum and dad, because even they as grandparents thought they would never get to see their granddaughter." Dean, the father, added that his daughter's name was a reminder, "that there is that hope".

Tonight marks the culmination of the season of Advent, the season of hope. Hope finds its fulfilment in the birth of a child. It doesn't mean that everything from now on in is rosy, or free from hardship or pain; far from it. Classic paintings of the nativity almost always show the shadow of the cross to come. But what this birth tells us is that there is always hope, and whatever we face God is with us and always will be.