

### **“Baby Steps” – Mt 1:18-25 – Advent 4 – Dec 19, 2004**

With less than a week to go, the excitement over Christmas continues to build, doesn't it? Traffic has become impossible, the evening News on TV is featuring how crowded the Park Royal Mall is getting, tempers are fraying – ah yes, the excitement mounts, as we build toward “The Day”.

We're like that, as people, aren't we? Almost all that we do seems to emphasise building up to a climax of some sort. Obvious events like Christmas Parades are an example, with a gradual buildup until the final float with Santa and his reindeer. Almost all of our cultural and drama works are that way as well – Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture with its building up to a noisy climax complete with cannons is a great example, but pick almost any movie or play to show a similar pattern.

Given our flair for the dramatic, can you imagine how the arrival of the Messiah would have been if God had given people the task of writing the screenplay? “Long lay the earth, in sin and error pining”, waiting for the Saviour, would be the opening. Gruesome and garish scenes illustrating, in luscious detail the sin and error, but without a lot of pining. A deepening spiral of sin and error, prophetic hints of the Saviour to come, and finally, with appropriate thunder, lightening, earthquakes, volcanoes, shooting stars and other heavenly portents, the whole earth would shake with the tromp of God's mighty combat boots, come to stomp out all that sin and error, and even some of the pining. Oh, what a mighty scene the arrival of the Messiah would have been if only God had let us write it – Star Wars, RoboCop, Dirty Harry, the U.S. 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry and a Presbytery Commission all rolled into one, fierce and mighty, swinging a huge laser sword without any regard for collateral damage, seeking and destroying sin and error and not a little pining as well for good measure! Oh, my pacemaker – it makes me breathless with excitement just to think about it!

And in many ways, that describes how people were anticipating the arrival of the Messiah. A ‘new’ David, ready to tackle the Goliath called the Roman occupiers, an Elijah-figure who would cure the sins and errors with a thunderous prophetic word, calling down the wrath of God like a purifying fire. There seems to be some force that impels people, people of faith in particular, to pine and long for horsemen of the apocalypse to come and purge the earth of those ‘other’ people who are committing all the nastiness. We can hear that longing expressed even in scripture from the second chapter of Genesis right through to near the end of the Book of Revelation, as people call for release from oppression and seek Holy Redress from the woes and ills of the world. Ah yes, if it had been up to us to write the screen play for how God would save the world, it would have been with a Holy Invasion, the tromp-tromp-tromp of God-sized combat boots crushing out all evil along with the grapes of wrath.

But that's not how God wrote the history, is it? God's way of grace and mercy was so totally different from how we would have written it. Instead of those God-sized combat boots, God gave us baby steps – the soft, halting gentle padding of a baby's foot upon this fragile earth. In a quiet, all-too-ordinary event shared by every one of us, God brought salvation to the earth through the birth of a baby. An unremarkable birth in so many ways, and yet so remarkable in its significance, in its meaning, that we in far-off lands and thousands of years later still celebrate that birth. Instead of a calamitous, earth-shaking and thunderous arrival, the Messiah appeared in a most natural way, in a tiny village in the middle of nowhere to an unremarkable couple. That arrival was so natural, so normal that it could have been missed, except for a few subtle little signals of God's involvement, signals so subtle that Matthew (and Luke, for that matter) goes to some lengths to explain, to tell us the how and the why of God's involvement in this earth-changing event.

The beginning point for Matthew, and for us, is that this event was the arrival of the Messiah. However, he feels a need to answer three somewhat difficult questions about this birth, the first being, “How can Jesus be the son of David?” The answer is straightforward enough, in that Joseph was

betrothed to Mary at the time of her conceiving, and at the time of the birth the two were married, making him the legal father of Jesus. In our day and age we need to be reminded that Joseph and Mary being betrothed meant something quite different from what we understand as being engaged. Betrothal in their day was a legal commitment that could only be ended with a divorce, which was indeed what Joseph was considering when we hear him thinking about “dismissing her quietly”.

The second question that Matthew addresses is the issue of “how can this unusual birth be claimed as God’s doing?” Unusual? Well, ordinary enough in the actual birth itself, but certainly unusual in the nature of how it came about. Matthew asserts rather matter-of-fact that the conception was “from the Holy Spirit” – which in and of itself would cause most of us at the very least to raise an eyebrow. “Hon, I think I’m pregnant”, paired with “but we haven’t had sex” would be enough to put just about any relationship, betrothal or not, on the rocks. But Joseph was a righteous man, we are told, wanting to do the right thing, and so there was no instant dissolution. In the time that followed, God revealed to Joseph through an angel in a dream what it was all about, and that he should hang in there, which of course he did. What happened to Joseph once he had fulfilled his role in providing the linkage and lineage with David is lost to history – we simply don’t know, as he quickly fades from the picture while the story shifts to the baby growing from son of David into Son of God.

Which is, naturally enough, the third question addressed by Matthew, namely, “where does this child fit in the divine scheme of promise and fulfillment?” It is vitally important for Matthew to point out that this birth, this arrival of the Messiah, was no capricious out-of-the-blue happening, but was instead very much a fulfillment of God’s promises in scripture, in what we now call the Old Testament. Some twelve times Matthew uses the expression we hear here, “what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophets” not just as a proof pattern but as a declaration of God’s faithfulness, as a demonstration that God indeed not only had been listening to His people, but had been talking to His people, and had now acted.

Why the need for so much explanation about this birth? Because it was so ordinary in the way that it happened, and yet so earth-shaking unusual in the way it came about, and in what it meant. Emmanuel, “God with us”, not in some thundering explosive arrival, but with the soft pitter-patter of baby steps. So long awaited, so unexpected, this way of God touching history, becoming one with us, sharing our fragility, reaching out in love, offering Himself in order that we could be saved from our sins, that we could be completely forgiven and reconciled with Him. While the birth of this tiny baby was ordinary, and usual, the meaning of the birth is cosmic, earth-changing, heavenly and divine, and so we need not only to hear the explanations, but to pause often to reflect upon and to give thanks for God’s incredible act of self-giving in the birth of Jesus.

Perhaps we need to reflect often also on the unusual way that God touched and joined with His creatures – unusual in that it was soft, tender, and ordinary. I think we have a tendency when we ask God in prayer to intervene in our lives that we look for some huge and dramatic Heavenly Ka-boom! to signal His arrival and intervention. Just maybe we need to remember that God’s intervention to save the world was done with tiny baby steps, and that if we look closely we can see similar hugely important baby steps of God happening in our lives. In doing so, we just might be able to recognize those tiny, incremental but oh-so-important changes in our lives signaling God responding to our pining.

We’re coming down the home stretch to Christmas, and looking forward to Christmas Eve, that most special of nights. Ponder a while, savour the delicious difference between the thunderous way we expected, and expect, the Messiah and the soft, tender, loving, self-giving way that it happened. Listen for the tiny pitter-patter, not of tiny reindeer feet, but of the baby steps that signaled the very presence of Emmanuel, God-with-us.