

CHURCHES NEED TO GO ‘DOWN-MARKET’!

The birth of Jesus: Matthew 1.18-24

Authorised Version (1611)

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God is with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And he knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.

New Revised Standard Version (1989)

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us’. When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus

Good News Bible (1976)

This was how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they were married, she found out that she was going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit. Joseph was a man who always did what was right, but he did not want to disgrace Mary publicly; so he made plans to break the engagement privately. While he was thinking about this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived. She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus – because he will save his people from their sins’. Now all this happened in order to make what the Lord had said through the prophet come true, ‘A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called ‘Immanuel’ (which means, ‘God

is with us'). So when Joseph woke up, he married Mary, as the angel of the Lord had told him to do. But he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to her son. And Joseph named him Jesus

The Message (2002)

The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.) Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced. While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: 'Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus – 'God saves' – because he will save his people from their sins'. This would bring the prophet's embryonic sermon to full term: 'Watch for this – a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son; they will name him Emmanuel (Hebrew for 'God is with us'). Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream: he married Mary. But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus.

Over the last 50 years a revolution has taken place in the British churches. 50 years ago the vast majority of churches used the *Authorised Version* of the Bible (the 'The King James Bible') in their worship. Today you can still hear the *Authorised Version* in the service of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge, but churches which are concerned to spread the faith have opted instead for modern translations.

Interestingly, most British churches have gone for American translations of the Bible. The *New English Bible* – now, in its updated form, known as the *Revised English Bible* – never proved popular, not least because you need an 'A' level in English to understand some of its language (e.g. 'the effulgence of his glory'). Instead, British churches have adopted the *New Revised Standard Version*, the *New International Version*, the *Good News Bible*, and most recently *The Message* – all American in origin (although the first three are also available in 'Anglicized' editions).

The *New Revised Standard Version*, currently the most academically respectable English Bible, seeks to retain the cadences of the *Authorised Version*, and is a little wooden. It may be the most accurate, but it is not the most accessible Bible.

The *New International Version* (rudely called the 'Nearly Inspired Version') is a favourite amongst evangelicals because it was translated by evangelicals – as if non-evangelicals could not be trusted with Bible translation! In fact it succumbs to some of the prejudices of North American evangelicals, and is a good deal less accurate than then NRSV, and no more accessible.

The *Good News Bible* was the brain-child of an American Baptist missionary, who wanted to produce an English Bible for people whose first language is not English. Adopting the linguistic principle of 'dynamic equivalence', it uses standard, everyday

English. Looked down upon by scholars, it is the most intelligible of all English Bibles for the average punter!

The latest best-selling Bible is *The Message* by Eugene Peterson, an American Presbyterian from an evangelical tradition. More of a paraphrase than a literal translation, it presents problems to British evangelical leaders whose views on Biblical inspiration mean they would prefer a more literal version, but their people in the pews love the freshness. But what's the point of a Bible translation if it doesn't communicate?

At a time when increasing numbers of people are unaware of the claims of the Christian faith, British church leaders should concentrate on making the 'good news' accessible to people today – and if this means going 'down-market' in the scholarship stakes, so what? Going 'down-market' is surely what the incarnation is all about!

(Rev Dr) Paul Beasley-Murray
Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford.