



The Fourth Sunday of Advent
18 December 2016

Having it Both Ways

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Reading: Matthew 1.18-25

When as an organisation you hire the services of a consultant, or as an individual you speak with a counsellor, you're becoming vulnerable, because you're making your life visible to a third party. And more than likely the first thing that external party says when they hold a mirror up to you is something you already know, indeed have been spending a long time, even a lifetime, skirting round, so long you've forgotten what it would be like not to. And the easiest thing for the consultant or counsellor to say, because it points up the most obvious flaw in the lives of most of us, is the wise-sounding sentiment, 'You can't have it both ways.' These words are at the same time helpful and deflating. They're helpful because what often gets us into trouble as organisations and as people is pursuing contradictory goals at the same time, not least of the problems of which is that we give those around us conflicting messages and then become baffling to relate to. When people like us and find us amusing and endearing they call this charm: when they don't like us, and find it alienating and infuriating, they call it manipulation. But these words are deflating because most of us, most of the time, are fully signed up to the project of having it both ways. Which means the advice of the wise, that we can't have it both ways, sounds insightful – but inapplicable.

If you want to become known as a sage, the simplest way is to coin your own version of the observation, 'You can't have it both ways.' Thus the memorable remark, 'If you didn't fight for what you want, don't cry for what you've lost': in other words you can't be both idealistic and lazy at the same time. Or, even more succinctly, 'You can have excuses or results – but not both.' Such wisdom is the lifeblood of executive seminars and power breakfasts. It's also the stuff of the self-help manual. Consider this from Abraham-Hicks: 'You can't care what they think and revel in it when they think something good, and then care what they think and wilt in it when they're thinking something bad.' Or, as Joyce Meyer puts it, more pithily, 'You can be pitiful, or you can be powerful, but you can't be both.'

It comes out all the time in political debate: for example in the United States, right-wing Republicans constantly bewail the wasteful, inefficient programmes that remain on the government's books; but when it comes to the death penalty, it seems those principles are set aside. So those who wish to abolish the death penalty say, 'You can't have it both ways.' The biggest political argument in the UK at the moment is much the same: Brexit sceptics constantly point out you can't have access to the European single market and at the same time deny the right to the free movement of people. And this kind of argument applies just as much to theology. The classic example is the complaint that God seems to allow so much suffering in the world. As Arthur C. Clarke puts it, 'You can't have both free will and a benevolent higher power who protects you from yourself.'

So we're agreed then – you can't have it both ways. Well, yes, if you're the counsellor or the consultant or the commentator pointing it out; but if you're on the receiving end, then... no. Plenty of people have demonstrated that actually, you can. Some of the most controversial issues in our culture arise from one person assigning themselves the right to tell another, 'You can't have it both ways.' A generation or two people ago some felt it was fine to tell a woman she couldn't bring up a family and work full time: these days it's become inexcusable to say such a thing, since the person holding such a view would generally never dream of saying the same thing to a man, let alone acknowledge the class privilege that assumes work is a choice rather than a necessity. Such an example points out that we use 'having it both ways' in two senses: one is about logical consistency,

as in, 'You can't say all people are created equal and at the same time condone slavery'; the other is about the slowness of imagination and unconventionality that says, 'I just can't take in the breadth and complexity of information and challenge you're giving me,' as in, 'You can't learn the trombone and the drums; you can't be a wheelchair user and a basketball player' – to which the answer is, 'Says who? Just you watch me.'

When Matthew and Luke tell us the Christmas story they're seeking to have it both ways. On the one hand, they're keen to portray Jesus as Son of God. So Gabriel tells Mary that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, and Joseph discovers that Mary's become pregnant without going through what we might call the usual channels. Not only is this a miracle, and thus the action of God, but it's the bringing-about of divine life on earth, uniting the essence of God with the existence of humankind. This isn't something Mary or Joseph chose, or made to happen: it's entirely God's initiative and God's doing. On the other hand, Matthew and Luke are equally keen to portray Jesus as Son of David, part of the royal household of Israel, a revival of the nation's hopes after 500 years of foreign rule, the true King of the Jews. Hence Matthew's gospel begins with Jesus' genealogy, tracing back to Abraham, being careful to note David and Solomon and the kings of Israel and Judah along the way, and coming to a climax in Joseph. The point is, not only does Jesus have the divine touch: he also has an exemplary cv.

The trouble is, as everyone from agony aunts to science fiction writers are quick to point out, you can't have it both ways. Here's the problem. If Jesus is Joseph's son, then he's not the result of a virginal conception, and he comes into existence in a more or less conventional manner, and we have to think of his divinity some other way or accept he isn't divine at all. But if Jesus really is the result of a virginal conception, he's not Joseph's son and he can't really claim the lineage of David and the heritage of all Israel's hopes.

Now, you could walk away from the incarnation right here. You could be like the sages from the worlds of self-help and corporate leadership and say, 'You can't have it both ways,' and say there's an inherent inconsistency in the Christmas story and it doesn't make any sense, and I'm going to cast it aside. Many do. But what I want you to see is what Matthew and Luke are doing by the way they tell us this story. The predicament of Mary being unexpectedly and unconventionally with child, and the magnanimity of Joseph being willing to embrace her despite public disdain, isn't just a construction to enable Christians to have it both ways. We're being told two vital truths about what incarnation means, and I want to explore what they are.

The first is that God is wrapped up in ordinary life. When people want to be spiritual they often assume that means withdrawing to a place of quiet or stepping out of the hubbub of their busy life. But the Christmas story happens to a very ordinary girl at a very common threshold, that of beginning to imagine spending the rest of her life with someone outside her family. Jesus doesn't come like a superhero in a blaze of glory. He comes into the mundane life of simple people facing challenging situations. And this is perhaps an even more important point: Jesus comes to people at their lowest ebb. The words, 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' comes from a very low moment in Israel's history. And this moment for Mary and Joseph is about perhaps the most humiliating experience anyone in their culture could go through. Luke does a similar thing when he locates the birth of Jesus in a stable: what could be more of an ordeal for a young girl than to give birth in a cowshed, a hundred miles from home. It's such an irony that Christmas has become the centre of the most sentimental aspects of Christian kitsch – because the circumstances of Jesus' birth were anything but syrupy. This is a story about shame, dirt, exclusion, and violence.

The second vital truth about what incarnation means is that this very personal story is at every step wrapped up in a profoundly political story. Israel's occupied by the Romans. Luke tells us there's a census. Matthew tells us King Herod's alarmed by what he hears from the Wise Men, and that he sets out to slaughter all the infant boys around Bethlehem. Our culture decided some while ago that faith was really a very personal, private, inward thing. Tell that to Herod. Mary and Joseph don't get the luxury of a mellow, untroubled domestic life where faith enables them to withdraw to a quiet place that makes them feel good, and they don't get the choice of a private, personal existence where faith doesn't involve them in politics and conflict and fear and attack. People who say religion

is a private matter and religion and politics should be kept separate haven't been reading the Bible. And they certainly haven't paid much attention to the Christmas story.

So we've seen four dimensions to Christmas – the cosmic level of miracle, of heaven moving, of stars and angels and most of all the virgin birth; then the historical level of Israel's heritage and destiny, Jesus being the one who restores the dream; and, lest these seem inconsistent, we've seen the way these are wrapped around by two further levels, the very personal experience of social ostracism and domestic humiliation arising from an unexpected pregnancy, and the political turmoil of an era of occupation, migration, and state violence.

But there's one phrase that sums all these dimensions up, and crystallises the meaning of incarnation in just three words. Matthew notes it, when Gabriel says the virgin's son will be called Emmanuel, 'which means, "God with us."' 'God with us' begins Matthew's gospel in the mouth of Gabriel and ends Matthew's gospel in the words of Jesus himself, when he says, 'Behold I'll be with you always.' 'God with us' is what it means for Israel to discover Jesus is the realisation of the covenant with Moses. 'God with us' is the cosmic statement that made the coming of Jesus to humankind the fulfilment of God's whole purpose in creation. 'God with us' is the discovery that Mary and Joseph make when they trust God to guide them through their time of domestic catastrophe. 'God with us' is what we hold onto amid political upheaval and social anxiety and economic crisis.

'God with us' is the final statement that, in the face of logic and conventional wisdom, God is determined to have it both ways. God is resolved to be righteous and yet beside us in our fallenness. God is committed to be eternal and yet alongside us in our mortality. God is shaped to be for everyone and yet revealed through the life of particular people. God has it both ways. That's our faith. That's our salvation. Some call it inconsistency: the gospels say, 'Your imagination just can't take it in.' Many say, 'God can't be like this.' God, in Christ, at Christmas, says, 'Says who? Just you watch me.'