

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Sep 8th 2016

Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

When I teach Zoology, I ask my students to know names of the various animal taxa. Most find the task of memorizing long and complicated names such as Echinodermata, Platyhelminthes and Nematomorpha daunting. But I explain that we need to know these names because they tell us about our common ancestors and evolutionary relationships. Knowing our past can help us today, especially to find new medicines and understand old diseases. For example, drug companies look to the Tunicata (sea squirts) for anti-cancer compounds. Despite being small sac-like blobs attached to the sea floor, they are members of the same phylum that includes all animals with dorsal nerve cords, including humans. Not a particularly noble lineage for a species that walked on the moon, composed symphonies, built the pyramids, discovered mathematics and invented the computer, but those sea squirts are part of our evolutionary history.

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus tells a similar story, involving long and complicated names with less-than-noble pedigrees. We might expect to hear how Jesus, the King of Kings, descended from a long line of upright and virtuous kings. It starts off promising with the familiar and popular Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But we soon hear about less familiar Gentile women – the wily Tamar, the prostitute Rahab and the loyal Ruth. Why mention Gentile women in the genealogy of the King of Jews? Then Matthew mentions Uriah, reminding us of how David sent him to his death after impregnating his wife, Bathsheba. Why reference such an ugly incident when relating the genealogy of the Light of the World?

The short answer is because Matthew is telling the truth. And sometimes the truth is unpopular or ugly. This is especially true when the truth deals with our past, our family (or evolutionary) histories. But then Matthew concludes his genealogy on a note of hope. He writes, "they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us'" and so reminds us of a greater truth – that despite our less-than-noble lineages and pasts, God has been and is with us. St. Paul knew this when he wrote that all things work for good for those who love God. Our messy and ugly pasts have shaped and formed who we are now. Can we rejoice in the Lord knowing that God has been and is with us now? As we celebrate the birth of Mary, we find new hope in our often messy and ugly world while being reminded of God's presence among us.

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