

## ADVENT 4 YEAR C 2009

In the name.....

Over the last couple of days outrage and anger have been expressed around NZ and many other parts of the world at a billboard put up by St Matthew's in the City in Auckland. The billboard shows Mary and Joseph in bed together and Joseph with a rather discouraged expression on his face. The caption reads, God was hard act to follow. Within 6 hours of the billboard going up it had been defaced and outraged people, mostly Roman Catholics, have written numerous letters of complain to Anglican bishops and to the media.

Many have said that the billboard was in bad taste, other have said that it was blasphemous, irreligious, theologically unacceptable and others have said that it was sinful that a church could do such a thing.

I would agree that the billboard is in very bad taste, that it is offensive to many people, and certainly has not done Anglican Roman Catholic relations any good at all, however, theologically it is not unacceptable.

The reality is that there is a theological, or at least Mariological difference between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church, and this billboard has highlighted this difference.

The Roman Catholic Church maintains that the Blessed Virgin Mary was perpetually a virgin, that is, she conceived Jesus while she was a virgin and remained a virgin until her assumption into heaven.

The Anglican Churches position is slightly different. We believe that Mary was a virgin when she conceived Jesus of the Holy Spirit and that after Jesus birth she could well have lived a normal married life with Joseph. In several places the scriptures speak of Jesus' brothers. The Roman Catholic Church maintains that these were spiritual brothers or

kinsmen or as you and I are brothers and sisters in faith, while the Anglican Church is quite happy to accept that the brothers mentioned in the scriptures could possibly have been Jesus' siblings.

The question that I think needs to be asked at this stage is why the Catholic Church sees it necessary for Mary to have perpetually remained a virgin.

This is best understood in terms of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Many non-Catholics think that this doctrine is about the conception of Jesus, but it is not. The dogma states that, from the first moment of her existence, she was preserved by God from the lack of sanctifying grace that afflicts mankind, and that she was instead filled with divine grace. It is further said by Catholics that she lived a life completely free from sin. Her immaculate conception in the womb of her mother, through sexual intercourse, should not be confused with the doctrine of the virginal conception of her son Jesus, known as the Annunciation, and followed by the Virgin Birth.

It is important, therefore, for Roman Catholics to maintain that Mary was a perpetual virgin because it would seem there is a link between the act of sexual intercourse and sin.

Interestingly leading protestant reformers such as Zwingli, Martin Luther and even Calvin supported this doctrine.

I do not however accept this doctrine, and it is one of the joys of Anglicanism that we can at times make these choices for ourselves and voice them.

I don't accept it for both biblical and theological reasons.

Biblically, there is clear reference in the scriptures to Jesus' *adelphoi*, which literally translated means brothers, it can however also mean cousins, kinsmen or countrymen, the term is vague. However, when referring to James and John, Andrew and Peter, *adelphoi* is always translated as them having been brothers.

I am quite happy to live with the ambiguity from a biblical linguistic argument, because I believe the more important argument is theological.

If we say that Mary was perpetually a virgin and that she lived the whole of her life free from sin, on one hand we condemn sexual relations, even within marriage as being sinful, but we also elevate Mary to a place beyond normal human life, and in doing so we distance her from ourselves, normal humanity.

For me the power of Mary's message to humanity is that she was an ordinary young woman who was open to the working of God in her life.

She was willing to put aside all her own concerns for propriety, all her needs for protection and security and took a great risk, a risk that could have cost not only her status and honour, but perhaps even her life. She took the risk and so she became the God-bearer, the one who brought God into the world.

The challenge for each one of us is that we too should be just like Mary we too should be God bearers.

Our role as Christians is to bring Christ into the world.

If, however, we elevate Mary too much we separate her from humanity and we send out a message that says to the world, you can never be like Mary because you are not special enough, pure enough, virginal enough, therefore you cannot possibly be good enough to bring Christ into the world. That I think would be a very sad message, because we are all

called to be Christ-bearers, each and every day, we are called to bring God into our world.

Back to our billboard that brought about this sermon. We may not agree with the sentiment of it, we may think it to be in bad taste, we may even think that it is disrespectful, if not of Mary and God, then certainly the faith of our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic Church.

But we can at least be thankful that all around New Zealand and much farther afield people are thinking about God, Christ, Mary and Joseph this Christmas and perhaps hearing for the first time the wonderful story about how God sent his Son Jesus Christ into the darkness of this world to make it a better place.