

Now I may speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.

I'm preaching this sermon that I'm about to give not only at 10 o'clock but also this afternoon at White Sands, just down the road. Cindy, the woman who organizes the services there, which I go to occasionally, always asks, by which I mean demands, a title for the sermon. So this sermon has a title and Cindy liked the title this week, which doesn't always happen, so I'm going to pass on what the title of this sermon is. It's entitled Christmas Deliveries, and there are lots of deliveries at this time of year. It must be the busiest time of year for the post office, I am presuming that given how many hours I've stood in line recently at the post office, I certainly hope it's the busiest time of the year. Lots of people like to swap cards and presents at this time of year.

I used to teach a year six class when I was a young curate. There was a church school, I was to go in every Friday morning and teach the class. Once at this time of year, I asked them to write a piece of work on what was special about Christmas. One boy wrote this, "If you ask people what is special about Christmas, they would probably say presents, but the real answer is that Jesus was born, I prefer the presents." His primary concern was the deliveries made by Santa Claus and now that's not my focus this morning. I can see three other types of delivery in the gospel reading that we've just heard.

The first is the delivery of a message. An angel comes to Joseph in a dream and told him what to do with his betrothed Mary, and this is the only time where Joseph takes center stage in the Christmas story, but we can see he plays a key role. In first century Palestine it was the custom for parents to arrange marriages for their children and upon completion of a marriage contract and the establishment of a bride price, the couple was legally bound. But they often continue to live with their respective families until the marriage ceremony, after which time the bride would move to the groom's house. And it's this period between the espousal and the wedding, which seems to describe the situation that we have here between Mary and Joseph.

Now, Joseph's plan A was to get married to Mary when the betrothal period came to an end and to live happily ever after, but it's obvious from the beginning of the story that plan A wasn't working out, as it says before they lived together Mary was found to be with child.

Now this is a big deal, any infringement of the betrothal period was liable at that time to very serious punishments, but Joseph, being a righteous man had hatched an alternative plan B. He wasn't going to go pursue the nuclear option and expose Mary to public disgrace, he planned it says, to dismiss her quietly. But just when he'd resolve to do this, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and delivers him a message. Or to be more precise the angel presents another option, plan C, take Mary as your wife and name the boy Jesus.

Joseph's plan B was a good plan. It came from a good place, a kind and caring heart, but it was still only a human plan that came from looking at the situation from a human perspective. The angel challenged Joseph to give up his plan and step out in faith and join with what God was doing in and through his espoused Mary. And what we can learn from the story of Joseph is that God isn't just with us when everything's hunky-dory, when things are working out as we'd hoped or imagined, when they're going the way things we want them to go. God can be working his purposes out when something seemingly bad that we've never hoped for or dreamt of works out. God was in Joseph's plan C.

Maya Angelou spoke often of her grandmother. She was a tall woman and Maya Angelou remembers her drawing herself up to her full six feet, hands clasped behind her back looking into a distant sky and saying, "I will step out on the word of God." Which is exactly what Joseph is doing here in this story. He steps out on the word of God that was delivered to him by the angel.

Second delivery, much more obvious, what's promised in this gospel is the delivery of a baby. And it strikes me how we talk about babies being delivered. If you go into hospital, you'll see they have a special ward, the delivery ward where babies are born. What was celebrated Christmas is the delivery of a very special baby, the baby Jesus. As Paul says in the book of Colossians, "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him." Which is an amazing thought. Jesus was given lots of names. As Matthew says, one was Emmanuel. Which means "God with us". And Matthew records another name for Jesus, which points to the third and final kind of delivery that we see in this passage. The angel said to Joseph, Mary will have a son and you are to name him Jesus because he will say or deliver his people from their sins.

We could use the word delivered to mean to be saved or to be rescued from something. Remember the Lord's prayer, "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." And it's good to think about this meaning of the word delivery in this season because it reminds us that this baby grew up, that the baby didn't remain a babe, he was born for a purpose. He was not so much a man born to be King as a man born to be a savior.

Let me read a verse from Colossians, actually, it's after the verses that I just quoted. "For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." Jesus came to put things right between humankind and God. The Christmas story, this sweet story of a baby is a story of salvation, about the beginning of God's plan to restore the relationship between himself and his people, which is the wonderful truth we celebrate in this Eucharist. As we hear the story of Jesus, his birth, we do so in the context of remembering his death and his resurrection because we always need to hold his birth and his death and resurrection together, the beginning and the end of his life.

So three types of delivery, the delivery of a message, the delivery of a baby, and deliverance from sin.

Amen.