

A child is born



Daily reflections for Advent 2017

Anne Le Bas

St Peter and St Paul, Seal

Introduction

At the heart of the Christmas story is an act of childbirth. Without it, there would be no story. That is so obvious that it may seem as if it hardly needs saying, but it seems to me that we often focus so much on the specialness of the child in question that we miss the fact that his arrival in the world was absolutely normal and ordinary, something every one of us has been through. There is no other way into the world.

One born every minute?

Unicef statistics say that there are, in fact, 255 babies born every minute – 367200 a day - and the Gospel accounts say nothing to suggest that Jesus' birth was any different in essence from any of those. Legends grew up fairly quickly about his birth, however, and by the Middle Ages, it was widely believed that Mary gave birth to him miraculously, without pain or effort. He somehow just popped out! This is pure wishful thinking, but it is wishful thinking which robs the Gospel of its Good News. If this mother and child were immune to the pain, risk and emotion of childbirth, then how can Christ be one of us, fully human as well as fully God? What good news can there be for today's parents and children? What good news can there be for any of us, because we are all somebody's child?

Stories of childbirth

That's why, this Advent, I will be focussing on Biblical stories about the birth of children. I will be asking how they help us to think about what it means to be a child or a parent today. It won't all be comfortable reading – there's not much that is cute or sentimental about these Biblical births – but it will take us through some of the very best and most powerful stories the Bible has to tell, and prepare us for the arrival in Bethlehem of the child who was born to bring us "life in all its fullness." (John 10.10)

There are 24 reflections in this booklet, covering almost all the stories about childbirth in the Bible. Each reflection starts with a Bible reference, which I suggest you look up and read in your own Bible. There are also some questions and a suggestion for prayer. These reflections will also be available on the church blog, day by day through Advent.
(sealpeterandpaul.blogspot.co.uk)

Anne Le Bas

Cover photo, Corniche Hospital, Abu Dhabi

A note on the treatment of women in the stories of the Bible

As you read these stories, you may be shocked at how powerless the women in them are and how badly they are sometimes treated. Does this mean that the Bible is a misogynistic, nasty document, which should be consigned to the dustbin? It's understandable that many people think so.

It's important to remember, though, that the Bible was written in a world which generally regarded women as inferior, and in which life was often precarious and brutal. It should be no surprise that the Bible often reflects this. What's remarkable is that women's voices and experiences are recorded at all. We often miss the fact that simply by telling their stories the Bible challenges the inhuman way they are sometimes treated. It shines a spotlight on their sufferings, but also on their hopes and dreams. The Biblical writers see and acknowledge women, and in doing that proclaims that God does too.

We are sometimes shocked by what we are reading. It is often the Biblical writers' intention that we should be. These stories bring women to the centre of the stage. The question they ask us is *"whose voices are you not hearing today? Whose suffering do you overlook?"*

December 1

Eve bears Cain & Abel

Genesis 4.1-17

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have produced a man with the help of the Lord'. Next she bore his brother Abel. (Genesis 4.1-2)

We can sense Eve's delight when she gives birth not only to her first child, but, according to Hebrew mythology the first child ever. We don't have to take the story of Adam and Eve literally to understand her feelings when Cain is born "I have produced a man!" (Cain's name, *qayin* in Hebrew) is a play on the Hebrew word *qaniyti* translated as "produced". Eve's own name means "the mother of all living" according to Genesis 3.20)

There is something quite extraordinary about meeting a new baby for the first time, whether it is your own or someone else's. A whole new human being has come into the world. A whole new future opens up. We may understand where children come from physically, while the ancient people who wrote this story wouldn't have done, but there is still a sense of wonder involved in childbirth. Scans can tell expectant parents a great deal about their child – their gender and their health for example – but no one can tell what that child's personality will be, or what they will go on to do. Naturally their parents will hope for good things, health, happiness, love given and received, but for good or ill, having children opens people up to the unknown.

Sadly, the story of Cain and Abel quickly turns from joy and wonder into tragedy. When they are grown up, Cain murders Abel in a fit of jealous rage, and then becomes a fugitive, leaving the place of his birth far behind him. Eve has lost both her children, in whom she had delighted and hoped, in one of the worst ways imaginable.

- *Have you ever held a very small baby – your own or someone else's – in your arms? What did it feel like to do so?*
- *What do you think those who saw you grow up hoped for you? How did you feel about their expectations? Were they helpful, or did they feel like a burden? Do you think you met those hopes, or do you feel you may have disappointed them?*
- *Pray for a child you know and tell God what you hope for them?*

December 2

Eve bears Seth

Genesis 4.25

Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, "God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him."

As we heard yesterday, Eve lost her first two children when Cain murdered his brother Abel. Cain was then banished, becoming a fugitive "East of Eden". But God had not forgotten Eve, and she bore another son. She named this child Seth, because God had given her another child in "place" of Abel. Cain marries and has children (with whom? the Biblical writers don't seem to be bothered about where this mysterious wife comes from!) and has children, but it will be Seth's descendants who will now take the story forward.

Those who have lost children, before birth, in infancy or in adulthood, may rightly protest at this story. There can be no "replacement" for a child who has died. There will always be a gap in their family, however many other children they have. The child they have lost will always be mourned and missed. If God did not "replace" Abel, however, the grand story the Bible tells would end here. .

We have to wonder, though, what it might have felt like to be Seth, growing up under the shadow of a terrible family story and being reminded in his very name that he is a "replacement" for the children Adam and Eve have lost to death and to exile.

- *What do you think Seth would have to say about his role in the family?*
- *Was your childhood overshadowed by any painful family stories or events?*
- *Pray for families who have lost children, and for children born after the loss of a previous child.*

<https://www.uk-sands.org> – help and information on stillbirth and neonatal death.

December 3

Hagar bears Ishmael

Genesis 16

“Abraham went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.”

God called Abraham to travel across the desert to a new land. God promised that he would be the father of a great nation through whom “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12. 1-3). But he and his wife, Sarah, had no children. How could this be, if he had no children to carry on his line?

For years they travelled, but no child appeared. Sarah was well beyond child-bearing age. Eventually Sarah hit on the idea of giving Abraham her Egyptian slave, Hagar, so that Hagar could bear him a child which would then be counted as Sarah’s (after all, God had said that he would give descendants to Abraham – he hadn’t promised they would be Sarah’s.) Hagar conceived, but as soon as she did, she began to “look with contempt” on Sarah, rubbing salt into the wound of Sarah’s infertility. In response, Sarah treated her badly, and Hagar ran away into the desert. An angel met her at a spring and told her to return, promising that she would herself be the mother of a “multitude” of offspring. She recognised that, despite the terrible circumstances she had endured, she had met with God in the desert, and was amazed that she had survived the experience. She went back to Sarah and her son, Ishmael, was born. Later on, she would be driven out again with her son. Once again, she and her child were saved by God, but on that occasion, she was not sent back. (Genesis 21.8-21) Tradition says that this ancient injustice was the root of the enmity between Israel and the Arab nations which continues to this day.

Hagar’s story is a brutal one. She is treated callously by both Abraham and Sarah, as one who has no worth to them except as a fertile body. Yet God sees her, values her and protects her. Her child will be significant and remembered.

- *Imagine you could talk to Hagar. What would you want to ask her or say to her?*
- *Why do you think Sarah and Hagar behave as they do?*
- *Pray for women living in cultures today which value them mainly for their ability to bear children.*

December 4

Sarah bears Isaac

Genesis 21. 1-7

“Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.”

After many years, when Abraham was, according to the Bible, a hundred years old, Sarah finally conceived and bore him a son. Abraham called him Isaac, which was derived from the Hebrew word for laughter. The name is a reminder of Sarah’s reaction when they were told this child’s conception was imminent, which was to laugh, perhaps in delight, perhaps in disbelief – we are not told which. (Genesis 18.9-15) Now Sarah has at last got a real cause for rejoicing. She has the last laugh. A lifetime’s shame at not being able to bear children has ended.

Just a chapter later, however, she nearly loses her precious child. Abraham is told by God to sacrifice their long-awaited child (Genesis 22.1-19). At the last minute, God sends a ram to be offered as a sacrifice instead. Sarah is not mentioned at all in this story. She is not told where Abraham is taking Isaac or for what, and no explanation is given to her when they return. We are left to imagine for ourselves the conversation that might have taken place when she eventually finds out how close Isaac came to death!

- *What do you think it might have been like to be Isaac? What might have been the positives and negatives of being born to parents who had waited so long for his arrival?*
- *How old were your parents when you were born? Do you think this had any impact on the way they felt about you or brought you up?*
- *Pray for those who are going through fertility treatment, waiting and hoping for a child, with no assurance that they will ever become parents.*

December 5

The daughters of Lot

Genesis 19. 30-38

“Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father”.

Anyone under the impression that the Bible is a boringly respectable book clearly hasn't read it. Today's story is a shocking tale of incest and disgrace. Lot, who was Abraham's nephew, had travelled with him to Canaan. Warned by God, he had fled from Sodom and Gomorrah just before they were destroyed by a rain of sulphurous fire. His wife, however, had been turned to a pillar of salt when she looked back at the burning cities. Now Lot and his two daughters were alone in a foreign land. The daughters realised they had no hope of finding husbands. Unless they took drastic action they were doomed to remain unmarried and childless. Their father's name would die out, which seemed to them a terrible thing – Lot's views are not recorded. So they got Lot drunk and, one after another, while he was unconscious, had sex with him. Each conceived and bore a child. The child of the oldest daughter was called Moab, the child of the second Ben-ammi. The end of the story explains that these were the ancestors of the Moabites and the Ammonites, tribes which later became bitter enemies of Israel.

The story is told, in part, to heap scorn on tribes with which Israel had long running feuds. In a society which regarded incest with horror, this was the worst insult that the Biblical writers could throw at them (though later a Moabite would become the grandmother of their greatest king – see Dec 18)

- *What do you think of Lot's daughters' actions? What alternatives would they have had?*
- *What might Lot have felt when he realised what had happened?*
- *Logically, no one is to blame for the circumstances in which they are conceived, yet children have often suffered because they were illegitimate, or because their families weren't considered respectable in some way. What might it feel like to grow up in the shadow of some sort of family disgrace?*
- *Pray for those whose childhoods are blighted through no fault of their own.*

December 6

Rebekah bears twins

Genesis 25.19-18

“When Rebekah’s time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb.”

Abraham and Sarah’s son, Isaac, grew up and married Rebekah, with whom he was very much in love. (You can read the story of their meeting in Genesis 24.) Like Sarah, she had trouble conceiving, but in her case it only took a prayer from Isaac for her to become pregnant. Miraculous conceptions after apparent infertility are common in the Bible – they are a sign that the child concerned will be in some way special or significant. It sounds as if Rebekah soon begins to regret her pregnancy, though. She is expecting twins, one of only two sets whose births are recorded in the Bible (see Dec 13 for the other set). Her twins struggle in her womb *“If it is to be this way, why do I live?”* she asks desperately, but God tells her it is a sign that *“two nations are in your womb”*. They will continue to struggle with each other throughout their lives, and will bequeath a legacy of struggle to future generations.

The two boys, when they are born, are very different, one red and hairy, the other smooth. Their characters seem to be fixed at birth. Esau becomes a hunter, a “man of the field”, but Jacob prefers to stay at home, a “quiet man”. His quietness hides a cunning nature. He will turn out to be a trickster, quite prepared to cheat and manoeuvre to get one up on his older brother who, though he was born just a few moments before him, stood to inherit the honoured place as head of the tribe.

- *Do you have any experience of twins in your family (or, indeed are you a twin yourself?) What do you think the advantages and disadvantages of being a twin might be?*
- *The Bible tells us that while Isaac loved Esau, Rebekah loved Jacob. What effect do you think this might have had on the family dynamics?*
- *If you have siblings, what are the differences between you and them, or are you similar to each other in character? If you are an only child, what do you think you have gained and lost because of that?*
- *Pray for families with twins, triplets or more, and for families where sibling rivalry makes life difficult.*

December 7

Leah bears a son for Jacob

Genesis 29.31- 35

When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.

Jacob, the younger of twins who cheated his brother out of his birthright (see yesterday's passage), fell in love with his cousin Rachel. Rachel's father, Laban, insisted he work for him for seven years in order to marry her. But Laban was as cunning a character as Jacob, and he substituted Rachel's elder sister Leah, heavily veiled, at the wedding, (Genesis 29. 1-30). Jacob was furious when his new wife removed her veil after the wedding, but in order to marry Rachel as well, had to commit himself to working for Laban for another seven years. We have no idea how Leah felt about the deception she had taken part in – she may have had little choice about the matter – but we can perhaps imagine what a miserable marriage this must have been, full of resentment and jealousy.

The writer of Genesis reminds us that God is with Leah, and that he cares about her. She is given the gift of children, a consolation to her in this loveless marriage. She gives them names derived from Hebrew words which reflect her feelings – Reuben means “see, a son”, Simeon is linked to the word “heard”, Levi derives his name from the word “joining” and Judah means “giving praise”. She sees her sons as signs that God has heard her, and gives praise to God for them, hoping that through them she will gain the respect and the emotional connection with Jacob she longs for.

- *What do you think it might have been like for these children, growing up under the weight of Leah's expectation that Jacob would love her because of them?*
- *How do you think Leah felt about the trick Laban played on Jacob in substituting her for her sister?*
- *Pray for families where there is little love or respect between parents, and for the children caught in the middle of their unhappiness.*

December 8

The Handmaids' Tale

Genesis 30.1-13

So Rachel gave Jacob her maid Bilhah as a wife; and Jacob went in to her. And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son...Then Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son.

The rivalry between unloved but fertile Leah and much-loved but infertile Rachel came to a head when Rachel decided that, if she could not bear children for Jacob then her slave, Bilhah, could do so for her. Bilhah had two sons, Dan and Naphtali, but tellingly, it is Rachel who names them. They count as her children. Two generations earlier Abraham had fathered a child by his wife's slave, Hagar. That ended in disaster, but nothing seems to have been learned by it, and Rachel is convinced that it will even the score between her and Leah. Leah believes she is now past child-bearing, and so, in retaliation, she gives her slave, Zilpah to Jacob. Zilpah also bears him two sons, Gad and Asher.

Bilhah and Zilpah have no power or voice at all. They say nothing. Their wishes are neither here nor there. This story, along with the story of Hagar, is the inspiration for Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel "The Handmaid's Tale" about a near-future time in which the few remaining fertile women in the society she writes about must bear children for high ranking officials. Atwood's novel is fiction, but this story reminds us that this practice was normal at the time the Bible was written. No particular comment is made about it. The only silver lining in the story for Bilhah and Zilpah is that their four boys are counted equally as descendants of Jacob, and each give their names to one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

- *If Bilhah and Zilpah could speak to us, what do you think they would say?*
- *How do you think Rachel, Leah and Jacob would respond if they were challenged about the way they treated their slaves?*
- *40 million people live as slaves around the world today, and it is thought that there are 13,000 slaves in the UK today; working in homes as domestic slaves, in nail bars and car washes, on farms and in sweatshops. Rochester Diocese has signed up as a beacon diocese to help uncover slavery and confront it. Pray for this work. You can find out more here. <https://youtu.be/16OddIYjQ-E>*

December 9

Leah bears Issachar and Zebulun

Genesis 30. 14-20

And God heeded Leah and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son...And Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son.

The extraordinary story of Jacob's tangled family continues with another episode in the sisterly rivalry of Rachel and Leah. Leah's son Reuben finds some mandrakes, plants thought to aid fertility, and brings them to Leah. Rachel asks to have them – she has still not been able to have a child. The price Leah demands is a night with Jacob, who has evidently stopped sleeping with her; he prefers Rachel. Jacob is told that this is the deal and he goes along with it. Leah conceives though it had seemed she was passed childbearing, and bears a fifth and then a sixth son.

This story exposes some of the complexities of polygamy, heightened in this case by Rachel and Leah being sisters. The Bible later forbids a man from marrying his wife's sister Leviticus 18.18, but polygamy itself is never outlawed. It continues throughout the Biblical period, though it gradually became less popular as it is displaced by the Roman custom of serial monogamy. In Roman society divorce was relatively easy, but you could only marry one spouse at a time.

- *Jacob seems oddly passive throughout Rachel and Leah's manoeuvring. What impression have you formed of him as you have read the stories over the last few days?*
- *Why do you think so many societies have been polygamous across history (many still are today)? Why might they have thought (and still think) this was a good way to live?*
- *Mandrakes were thought to be aids to fertility. Pray for those undergoing modern fertility treatment, and those hoping to foster, adopt or have children through surrogacy today.*

Rochester Diocese is part of an initiative to encourage fostering and adoption. Find out more at www.homeforgood.org.uk/kent. Families of all shapes and sizes, including single people and same-sex couples can be considered as foster or adoptive families.

December 10

It's a girl!

Genesis 30. 21

Afterwards Leah bore a daughter, and named her Dinah.

This is one of only two mentions I have been able to find in the Bible of the birth of a daughter (the other is in Hosea 1.6 – see Dec 21). There are plenty of daughters in Scripture, of course; every woman is someone's daughter. Their actual births aren't mentioned, though, probably because they were not seen as significant.

So why is Dinah's birth recorded, the last of Leah's children to be mentioned? To find out we need to turn on to Genesis chapter 34, where we find the rest of the story of Dinah. Shechem, a powerful man from a neighbouring tribe rapes her, and then tries to take her as his wife. Jacob and his sons are outraged and engineer retribution not only on Shechem but also on the rest of the men in his tribe. Dinah's feelings about all this are not recorded. She has no agency at any point in the story, but it is significant in the history of the development of Israel, which is why we hear of it.

I have included her story so that we notice how invisible girl babies are in Scripture. In many societies, girls are still seen as an unwelcome burden, because dowries may have to be paid for their marriages or because they will leave the family home on marriage, and not be able to help with the work. Gender selective abortion and infanticide have resulted in a significant gender imbalance in some parts of the world. In parts of rural China, as a result of the one child rule, 130 male babies have been born for every 100 female babies over several decades. Many men now have little possibility of marrying. This is an unintended, but surely not unforeseeable consequence of a policy which failed to take into account the deeply rooted bias towards sons in Chinese society.

- *Dinah has no voice in her own story. What do you think she would say to us if she could?*
- *Are there any stories in your family history where parents particularly wanted a boy or a girl, or where girls and boys were treated differently as they grew up?*
- *Pray for children growing up in families where their gender is not welcome or celebrated.*

December 11

Rachel gives birth to Joseph

Genesis 30.22-24

Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son, and said, 'God has taken away my reproach' and she named him Joseph, saying, 'May the Lord add to me another son!'

At long last, Rachel's dream comes true. She bears a son to Jacob. This son will turn out to be immensely significant in the story of the Jewish people. This is Joseph, who will one day be sold into slavery by his brothers. Joseph will end up in Egypt, where he will rise to be a powerful official of the Pharaoh. (Genesis 37-45) Because of him, the whole family will eventually settle in Egypt, and will remain there for 400 years, before Moses leads them back to the Promised Land of Canaan.

But all this is in the future. All Rachel cares about is that, finally, her 'reproach' has been taken away. The stigma she suffered as a childless woman has gone.

- *The writer of Genesis says that God "remembered" Rachel and "heeded her". How do you feel about this view of God? Have you ever felt that God had forgotten you, as Rachel seems to have done?*
- *Think about children you have watched grow up. Could you have imagined when they were young what they might grow up to be and do?*
- *Every person is a gift of God to the world. Give thanks for someone you are particularly glad was born, and give thanks too for the gift of your own life.*

December 12

Rachel gives birth to Benjamin

Genesis 35.16-21

Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labour. When she was in her hard labour, the midwife said to her, 'Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son' As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni, but his father called him Benjamin'

Having finally borne her first son, Rachel becomes pregnant again. This time, though, things don't go well. Like many women throughout history, she dies in childbirth.

As she dies she names her son 'Ben-oni', which means 'son of my sorrow' but his father renames him 'Ben-jamin', son of my right hand. He is the son who will remind Jacob of Rachel, his beloved favourite wife, and he will always be special to him. Later, when his older brothers are sent down to Egypt to try to buy food during a famine, Benjamin will be kept at home. Jacob thinks he has lost Joseph; he cannot bear to think that he might lose Benjamin too.

Maternal mortality rates in the developed world fell steeply during the early twentieth century. The advent of antibiotics, among other medical advances, played a part but the simple fact that women had fewer children was significant too. In the developing world, though, maternal mortality is still high. According to the World Health Organisation 99% of women who die in childbirth are from developing countries. Limited access to healthcare is part of the problem, as is the tendency for girls to give birth at a young age. Those who survive childbirth can suffer life-altering injuries such as obstetric fistulae, which can leave them incontinent and rejected by their communities. To find out more, visit <http://www.hamlinfistulauk.org>

- *What might it have been like to be Benjamin, the child whose birth had caused his mother's death?*
- *Are there any stories in your own family of traumatic births? What were the effects of these on your family history?*
- *Pray for children whose mothers have died, for mothers who suffer the effects of traumatic birth and for those who work to support and help them*

December 13

Tamar bears Perez and Zerah

Genesis 38

About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant and a result of whoredom." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned."

At the end of this very shocking story, Tamar gives birth to twins. The route to that birth is a grim one, however. In Tamar, we meet one of the bravest and most persistent women in Scripture. She was married to Er, the son of Judah, one of Jacob's children. But Er died before she had any children of her own by him. According to the custom of the time, called "levirate marriage", the next oldest brother in the family was obliged to marry her and father a child which would count as her first husband's, so that his family line would continue and she would have children of her own to support and help her. But Onan refuses to father children for his dead brother. Tamar is told to wait until Judah's youngest son, Shelah, grows up, but Judah delays and delays arranging the marriage, leaving Tamar with no children. To force Judah's hand, she disguises herself as a prostitute and Judah himself sleeps with her.

When she is found to be pregnant, Judah, not aware that he is the father, condemns her to be burned. It is only then that she reveals that he is the father of her children. He is shamed into acknowledging that "she is more in the right than I" The story is shocking to us. It would also have been shocking to those who first heard it, and it was meant to be. It underlined the vulnerability of widows in a patriarchal culture, and the responsibility, echoed time and time again through the Old Testament, that they should be given special care. Levirate marriage, while it seems odd to us, was a practical way of ensuring that widows were not left without support.

- *Why do you think that Judah and his sons were so reluctant to fulfil their responsibility to Tamar?*
- *Do you know of any widows in your family history? What was life like for them?*
- *Pray for widows and widowers bringing up children while grieving the loss of their spouses.*

December 14

Shiphrah, Puah and the Hebrew mothers

Exodus 1.7-22

Pharaoh said: "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live. But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live."

We're finally out of the book of Genesis but the story of Biblical childbirth doesn't get any easier. Jacob and his family had come down to Egypt to escape famine in Canaan. There they had multiplied to the point where the Egyptians felt threatened by them. They were enslaved, and Pharaoh eventually ordered that all male Hebrew babies should be killed at birth. Two brave and cunning Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, decided upon a bold course of action, lying to Pharaoh that the Hebrew women were so strong that they gave birth without needing help. Shiphrah and Puah must have known that they were risking their own lives by lying to Pharaoh, whom the Egyptians worshipped as a living god, but that did not stop them.

Eventually Pharaoh took even more drastic action, and commanded the Egyptian people to kill the Hebrew boys themselves, but Shiphrah and Puah's actions saved many lives, and, according to the story God honoured them and gave them families of their own.

- *The Hebrew midwives displayed astonishing courage. How good are you at confronting things that are wrong? Can you recall times when you have done so, or failed to do so?*
- *Are there any stories in your family history of the people, medically trained or not, who attended a birth? What do you imagine it is like to be a midwife? What joys and fears might midwives have?*
- *Pray for midwives and other medical professionals who help mothers give birth. Pray also for those who do not have access to the medical help they need.*

December 15

Jochebed gives birth to Moses

Exodus 2.1-10

The woman conceived and bore a son: and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.

At the beginning of the second chapter of Exodus, we meet a nameless woman who has a nameless son. He could be any one of the Hebrew babies whom Pharaoh is trying to get rid of. This is “anywoman”, and “anybaby”. There is nothing at all unusual about this woman. She feels just as most mothers would about their children in this situation, a fierce love and protectiveness. There is nothing unusual about the child either. He is vulnerable and helpless. We aren’t told until verse 10 that this is that this is Moses, the child who will grow up to lead his people out of slavery and back to the Promised Land from which their ancestors came. The mother’s name, we discover in Exodus 6.20, is Jochebed.

But she isn’t the only mother in the story. Pharaoh’s daughter, who takes pity on the child she finds and takes him under her protection, acts as a mother to Moses, as do her attendants, who must realise the truth, but keep it to themselves. Miriam, his big sister, also keeps a motherly eye on him. There is a whole network of mothering around Moses, which enables him to survive into adulthood.

- *Imagine you are Moses’ mother, making the papyrus basket in which you will entrust him to the crocodile infested river Nile. What might you be thinking and feeling as you weave it?*
- *Who nurtured and protected you as a child? Did you have more than one “mother”, as Moses did?*
- *Pray for those who “mother” other people’s children – other family members, foster parents, friends, neighbours, teachers, children’s group leaders etc*

December 16

The birth of Samson

Judges 13

Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines. (13.4-5)

The story of the birth of Samson is another story of a childless couple who eventually have a special baby, but in this case, there is no manoeuvring or manipulating. Manoah's wife, who isn't named, is visited by an angel and told she will conceive. Her husband doesn't seem to believe her, but when the angel appears to him too he is finally convinced. If that reminds us of the stories of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, it is probably meant to. The writers of their birth stories appear to have modelled them on stories like these.

Manoah and his wife are told that their child is to be a "nazirite", someone set apart for a special purpose. The first verse of the passage sets the scene; Israel is under attack by the Philistines, a warlike tribe which threatens their existence. Samson will be given extraordinary strength to lead the fight against them. You can read the rest of his story in Judges 14-16.

The people of the Bible had only the vaguest idea of how babies were conceived, and they viewed every baby as a gift of God, a miracle. The conception of children like Samson was simply a bit more miraculous than most – a sign that they were set aside for some special purpose.

- *Are there any stories in your family of "miraculous" births, babies whose conception or birth defied the odds?*
- *What do you think the effects of knowing you are a "miracle" baby might be on the child as it grows up?*
- *Some children's lives seem set on a particular course from an early stage, for good or ill. They may have a particular talent and feel duty bound to develop it, or they may have been told that they "will never amount to anything" and feel that their future can never hold out any hope. Pray that all children might be free to find God's purpose for their lives.*

December 17

Hannah gives birth to Samuel

1 Samuel 1

Hannah said; "for this child I prayed and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him."

Hannah was one of the two wives of Elkanah, but while Peninah has many children, Hannah is childless. It is a recipe for rivalry and ill-treatment, as we have already discovered in earlier stories. Desperate, Hannah prays at the shrine at Shiloh. (Jerusalem has not become the capital yet, and there is no temple.) Her prayers are so intense that the old priest, Eli, thinks she is drunk. When he hears her story he is moved and prays that God will grant her prayer. When her child is born, she names him Samuel, which may be a play on the Hebrew word "listen".

It may surprise us that, as soon as the child is weaned, Hannah brings him to Eli to be brought up at the shrine. He is another 'nazirite', like Samson (see yesterday), with a special purpose to fulfil. Samuel's job will be to listen for and proclaim the word of God to a people who have forgotten what it sounds like.

- *What do you think of Hannah giving Samuel to Eli to bring up? Why might she feel she needs to do this? Could you have done it?*
- *Are there times in your life when you have desperately wanted something? Did you get what you wanted? Did you tell anyone about your desire, or keep it to yourself? Did you tell God about it?*
- *Pray for parents who are separated from their children, by choice or unavoidable circumstances, and for children separated from their parents.*

Ruth Chapter 4

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel. He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.'

The story of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz, told in four short chapters in the book that bears Ruth's name, is one of the most beautiful in the Bible. Many years before, Naomi and her husband went from Israel to Moab in a time of famine. Her two sons married Moabite women, but before any children could be born to them Naomi's husband and both her sons died. Naomi, a lone, childless widow, decided to return to Israel to take her chances there, hoping to throw herself on the mercy of her extended family. She encouraged her Moabite daughters in law to remain in Moab and marry again, but Ruth insisted on coming back to Israel with her. *"Where you go I will go... your people shall be my people and your God my God" (1.16)*

When they arrive in Israel, their position is very precarious, but Ruth's quiet care of Naomi didn't go unnoticed. A distant relative, Boaz, saw Ruth and fell in love with her, and eventually they were married. Their child was counted as the child of Naomi's dead son, so that his line continued. In the closing verses of the book we discover that Ruth and Boaz' child was named Obed, and *"he became the father of Jesse, the father of David"*. Ruth, a Moabite outsider, becomes the grandmother of the greatest king of Israel. You might also notice from the story that Boaz is a descendant of Perez, the child of Tamar (see Dec 13). Two women who would have been regarded as disreputable outsiders, are part of his lineage, a lineage which eventually leads to Jesus. Matthew mentions both these women in his genealogy. (Matthew 1.3&5)

- *How far back can you go back in your genealogy? What do you think your ancestors would think of your life now?*
- *Are there stories of migration in your family? How do you think that affected those involved?*
- *Pray for immigrant and refugee families, as they make new lives in a foreign land.*

December 19

Bathsheba bears children by David

2 Samuel 11.1-12.25

The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant".

David had become king over Israel, and like many kings, thought that meant he could have anything he wanted, including, in this case, the wife of another man, Uriah, whom he had seen bathing when she thought she was unobserved. She became pregnant by David. This was highly inconvenient since Uriah was one of David's commanders, and was away leading David's troops in battle. David brought Uriah home and tried to induce him to sleep with Bathsheba, so the child could be passed off as his. When that failed he had Uriah put in the frontline of the battle, hoping he would be killed, which he soon was. David then married Bathsheba. We don't know what she felt about all this. The only words we have of hers are the fateful message she sent to David "I am pregnant."

Nathan, the prophet, came to David and challenged him with a story about a rich man who stole the one ewe lamb of a poor neighbour to feed a guest instead of taking one of his own, large flock (David had many wives and concubines by this stage.) When David expressed his horror at this story, Nathan told him that "you are the man", and denounced his treatment of Uriah (he doesn't mention his treatment of Bathsheba!) The punishment for this would be that Bathsheba's child would die. Despite David repenting and fasting, the child died a week later.

David and Bathsheba mourned, and in time, they had another son, Solomon, who went on to succeed David to the throne, and whose wisdom was legendary. It is a sad, sordid story; there were no winners.

Traditionally Psalm 51 is attributed to David, a psalm of lament and repentance for his actions.

- *Bathsheba's voice is never heard in the story. What do you think she thought and felt as it unfolded?*
- *The Biblical writers interpreted the death of Bathsheba's first child as a punishment on David. What do you think of this?*
- *Pray for children conceived in circumstances where their birth is viewed as shameful by the society around them.*

December 20

Solomon and the prostitutes' children

1 Kings 4.17-28

'When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne.'

Until very recent times it was impossible to be certain who a child's parents were. DNA testing can now tell us this, but in the past, children mixed up at birth might never be reunited with their true families.

In this story, King Solomon, who was famed for his wisdom, is presented with an apparently impossible dilemma. Two women who are prostitutes share a house. Both have baby sons within days of each other, but according to the woman who speaks first to Solomon, the other woman's child dies when she lays on him. Allegedly, she swapped her dead child for the living child of the other. But the other woman denies this. There is no way of proving it one way or the other.

Solomon's judgement is shocking. The child should be cut in two and half given to each woman. Instantly one woman – the story says it is the mother of the living child – insists that the child be given to the other woman. At least he will then live. This is enough to convince Solomon that the woman prepared to give him up to save his life is the one who is his mother. Even if she isn't (there is the possibility that she is mistaken herself) the child will be better off than he would be with a woman who was happy to see him cut in half just so that she could win the argument!

- *What do you think was going on in the head of the woman who was apparently happy for the child to be cut in two? (v. 26)*
- *Children can easily become the battleground between warring parents who have split up, or become focuses for tensions between parents and grandparents or in-laws. Have you had any experience of this?*
- *Pray for children who feel "torn in two" by squabbling families and are not valued for themselves.*

December 21

Gomer bears children to Hosea

Hosea 1 & 2

“Go take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom.”

The prophet Hosea is commanded, according to the book that bears his name, to marry a woman who is a prostitute, as a message to the people of Israel. This seems extraordinary to us, but this sort of prophetic action was quite common in the Old Testament. Gomer bears Hosea three children whose names all in some way reflect what Hosea believes God is saying to his people. They are facing destruction at the hands of the Babylonians. According to the prophecy, their nation has been fatally weakened because they have made alliances with other nations and worshipped other gods.

The children are named Jezreel, after the place where King Ahab, husband of Jezebel, was defeated and killed. It was a byword for savage punishment. The second child, a daughter, is called Lo-ruhamah, which means “not pitied”, and the third is Lo-ammi, which means “I am not yours”. The people of Israel have forgotten God’s covenant with them “You will be my people and I will be your God.”

But all is not lost. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon God promises he will bring his people home and repair the relationship they have with him. Hosea 2.22-23 promises a day when God will “sow” his people once again in the land (Jezreel literally means “God sows”). He will have pity on Lo-ruhamah, (“not-pitied) and will say to Lo-ammi “you are my people; and he shall say “you are my God.”

Hosea’s prophecies are full of the forgiveness of God, despite endless provocation. Perhaps Hosea learned this within his very difficult marriage.

- *What is your reaction to this story? What do you imagine family life in Hosea’s house was like?*
- *Our names matter to us, whether we like them or not. Do you know why your parents chose your name? Do you think it suits you, and if not, what would you like to change it to?*
- *Pray for families living amid the destruction of war and civil strife, who feel they are deserted and forgotten by God and the world.*

December 22

John the Baptist is born

Luke 1. 5-24 & 57-80

The angel said: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John"

There are only two accounts of births in the New Testament, of which this is the first. The angel Gabriel appears to the elderly priest, Zechariah, as he offers incense in the sanctuary of the Temple. The angel tells him that his equally elderly wife, Elizabeth, will bear a child who will be the forerunner of the Messiah. Like Samson and Samuel (Dec 16 & 17), he will be set aside from birth as a 'nazirite' (v.15). He will not drink, and will be filled with the Spirit of God. Zechariah cannot believe this news, and is rendered speechless by Gabriel until the birth. Elizabeth conceives, however, just as the angel promised, and joyfully proclaims that *"the Lord has ...looked favourably on me and [taken] away the disgrace I have endured among my people."*

When the child is born, much to his relatives surprise Elizabeth insists that his name will be John, not Zechariah, after his father, and Zechariah's speech is restored when he confirms this by writing it on a tablet. He sings a song (which is traditionally known as the Benedictus), which celebrates this child who will "give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins," and "light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."

We know, though Zechariah and Elizabeth do not, that John will end up being executed by King Herod, beheaded on the whim of his step-daughter, Salome. Zechariah and Elizabeth rejoice at his birth - he is another of the long-awaited miracle babies of Scripture - but though he brings them joy now, the task he has been born for will cost him everything.

- *We don't know whether John's parents were still alive when he started his ministry in the desert, or when he was killed . If they were, what do you think they might have felt?*
- *Are there any stories in your family of people who did unusual, brave or risky things?*
- *Pray for parents whose children are aid workers or put themselves in risky positions for the sake of others.*

December 23

The birth of Jesus

Luke 1.26-56 & 2.1-20, Matthew 2

Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

The story of the birth of Jesus – the last birth story in the Bible – is also its most familiar. Only Luke records the actual birth. Matthew simply tells us that “after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came” (Matthew 2.1). He doesn’t say how long after – it may have been anything up to two years later – and he says nothing about the birth itself.

We don’t know how much, if any, historical fact there is in either Luke or Matthew’s stories (they are quite different, and cannot easily be mashed together, though this doesn’t stop us trying to!). Both Luke and Matthew, however, set the birth in Bethlehem, and make the point that Jesus is born to an ordinary, perhaps quite poor family – there is no room for them at the inn. Both their stories stress that Jesus is born against a backdrop of danger. Matthew has Herod try to find and kill Jesus. Luke tells of them being forced by a census to make a risky journey to a place where they have nowhere to stay. Both Gospels use the birth stories as ways to introduce the kind of themes they will dwell on in their stories of the adult Jesus. This is God’s son. In him, God comes to dwell with us, not choosing a life of wealth and power, but the vulnerability of a child, born in a world that is hostile to vulnerability then, just as it is now. Throughout his life he will identify with the vulnerable and marginalised, and his life will culminate in the ultimate vulnerability of death on a cross.

- *What is your earliest memory of hearing the Christmas story? Who told it to you first? Can you remember what you thought and felt about it?*
- *As you read the story, be aware of what in it feels like good news to you today?*
- *Pray for children born in poverty today, for whom there is “no room at the inn.”*

December 24

Birth and rebirth

John 1.1-18

To all who received him, who believed in his name he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, or of the will of the flesh or of human will, but of God.

We have heard 23 stories of physical births in the Bible, but we will finish with an equally important spiritual birth, the new birth God promises to everyone who is open to receive it.

The famous prologue to John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..." functions a bit like a birth story. It sets the scene for Jesus' adult ministry, just as the shepherds and wise men do in Luke and Matthew's accounts. At the heart of John's message is his good news that God in Christ dwells with us, born of a human mother, and that this means that we too can be born of God. We are his children, with all that implies. We can be part of his family, as we were always meant to be, at home with him, sharing in his life. It isn't a new idea. Back in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, the people of Israel were told by Moses that "*you were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, you forgot the God who gave you birth.*" (Deut 32.18) We were always God's children, right from the beginning, and God longs for us to remember this, living the life of love and peace which he intended for us. "*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.*" (1 John 4.7). As we follow Jesus, says the New Testament, we can rediscover our original sonship and daughtership, draw close again to God with confidence, and learn to live out the "family likeness." That's what John means when he says that we need to be "born again".(John 3.16)

- *In what way would you like to be "born again", have a fresh start, this Christmas?*
- *Do you feel that you are part of the family of God, his beloved daughter or son? If not, what stops you feeling like that, and what can you do about it? (I am always happy to listen if you want to talk!)*
- *Pray for yourself, that you will find the "new birth" you need this Christmas.*