

I like to cycle daily,
either to the Mere, or Staintondale, or Scarborough Castle.
Last Monday the steep path up from the North Bay
was blocked by a couple of likely lads mending the tarmac.
'Bloody hell, you're fit,' one of them exclaimed
as he hastily moved his tools out of my way.
'It's my daily work-out,' I explained
'Bloody hell, you're telling me!' he replied.

It's nice to be surprised by an arresting narrative.
I returned and read through this morning's Gospel
in the original ancient Greek
and was surprised by two things.
The first is that the passage contains
not one but two genitive absolutes,
which are very rare.

It is a construction using a past passive participle for a clause which has absolutely nothing to do with the rest of the sentence.

‘Last Tuesday I went to Proudfoots – my neighbour’s white car was very dirty – and bought a truly delicious Christmas Log.’

‘My neighbour’s white car was very dirty’ would be a genitive absolute in Greek, ablative absolute in Latin.

Pleased though I was to be reminded of my Greek and Latin lessons at SBHS, in both cases Matthew got it wrong, in that the subject of both his genitive absolutes were very much connected with the rest of the sentence.

‘When his mother Mary was engaged to Joseph

- genitive absolute -

she was found to be with child.’

‘Just when Joseph had decided to do this

- genitive absolute -

an angel of the Lord appeared to **him** in a dream.’

So Matthew got his Greek grammar wrong,

twice in seven verses.

You’d think saints would be better educated!

There are several medieval paintings

of the Holy Spirit as a dove

perched on Matthew’s shoulder

dictating his Gospel,

so the Holy Spirit ain’t that hot at Greek grammar either!

Yet despite the appalling grammar,

God breaks through with his miracle.

‘Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in,’

sang Leonard Cohen.

Don't squeeze out God

because of your obsession with good taste.

God ain't fussy:

he was born in a cowshed and died on a cross.

The other thing that surprised me was the euphemisms,

at least three.

‘Before they came together,’

nudge, nudge, wink, wink.

‘She was found to be with child’

actually the original Greek

says

‘She found she’d got a bun in the oven.’

Nudge, nudge wink, wink.

‘He did not know her until she had born a son.’

Nudge, nudge, wink, wink.

Actually no husband knows his wife

until she has given birth.

The pain, the ear-splitting screams,

the blood, the body broken in two...

But then the look

as she holds her baby to her breast

for the first time ever,

positively radiant, positively beatific.

I don't know what spin doctor
the Early Church hired to get its message across,
but having a mother and baby as the star of our show
was nothing short of divine.

And staging that birth in the direst poverty,
a stable,
surrounding by shepherds and cuddly farm animals
with murderous Herods waiting in the wings,
wow,
no other faith can hold a candle to that.

And don't get hung up
about all that
He-did-not-know-her stuff
as if sex was dirty and God had to be clean.

He was born in a crappy stable, for goodness sake!

Sex is not sordid, but sacred,
the source of life.

Whenever I preach
and am daunted by folk scowling at me,
I remind myself
that every single person in this congregation
was produced by an act of sexual intercourse.

No, Mary not having sex before she bore Jesus
wasn't God's verdict on sex but on Jesus.

That Jesus was a total break with
all that went before and came afterwards.

He wasn't just more of the same
in a slightly different package,
which you could take or leave
like Boris Johnson or Jeremy Corbyn.

He was totally different.

‘Never have we heard the like,’ even his critics declare.

BBC2’s wonderful series,

the Mountain Vet

staged a Virgin Birth.

A mare gave birth to a foal but had never mated.

‘Ah, it must be an immaculate conception!’

the delightful Irish vet quips with a twinkle in his eye,

muddling his doctrines.

But then they found a stallion

had had his wicked way with her at a race meeting.

But Matthew makes it clear there was none of that.

No nudge, nudge, wink, wink:

Silly girl, she must have got her dates wrong,

it must have been a premature birth or
she must have had a secret lover
with Joseph or even the Holy Spirit a cuckold.
or she was seduced or was raped and never twigged.

No, none of that.

Conceived by the Holy Ghost.

End of.

Or rather beginning of.

Because this time,

without hesitation, deviation or repetition,

God declared that he was in birth

which broke history in two, BC/AD,

that he was in every body broken,

he was in the screams,

he was in the pain,

he was in the blood:

this is my blood.

He was also in the look,

the look that Mary gave to her new born son

as she wrapped him in swaddling cloths

and laid him in a manger,

the same look that she gave to her crucified son,

as he was wrapped in swaddling clothes

and laid in a tomb,

positively radiant, positively beatific,

waiting for Easter day's dawn.

Daily cycle-rides notwithstanding,

this Christmas may you be surprised

by the most arresting narrative in the history of the world.