



(Mobile Press Register photo by J.P. Schaffner)

AIDAN LICARI

Gospel authors vary Christmas accounts for audience appeal

By SYLVIA HART
Press Register Reporter

The gospels of Matthew and Luke both present infancy narratives, or accounts of Jesus' birth, but these two gospels "have only a few things in common."

DR. AIDAN Licari, a member of the religion faculty at McGill-Toolen High School in Mobile, talked about the differences in the two accounts of Jesus' birth and reasons for the differences in an address to the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue Group during a program at Holy Family Catholic Church.

Licari said, "The infancy narratives were written by different men at different times, different places, for different reasons and different audiences."

MATTHEW'S GOSPEL, Licari said, "is a teaching tool, a special kind of religious text which was written for the early Christian community ... which seems to have been a mixture of Jewish and Gentile Christians living in Syria around the year 80."

Matthew's gospel draws on two written sources, the gospel of Mark which was written about the year 50 and the collection of the sayings of Jesus. Additionally, Matthew "added many of his own personal touches, many Old Testament references so that the Jewish Christians he knew might better counter the arguments of the Jewish leaders who denied that Jesus was the promised messiah."

THE GOSPEL of Mark which had preceded Matthew's gospel was able simply "to proclaim the wonderful news of the resurrection and to celebrate the saving ministry which led to it." Mark did not include an infancy account, said Licari, but "as time went on" people were removed "from the historical fact" and they wanted to know more about Jesus.

"There had been traditions going around about Jesus' family, the names of his parents, his birthplace and his family home at Nazareth. The spirit that moved Matthew to include these things in his gospel also moved him to recall the great prophecies of the Old Testament, to connect these to Jesus' early life.

"**WHAT EMERGED** was not a literal history but a kind of spiritual history of the promise of the messiah and its fulfillment, and the tools Matthew was using were the Old Testament and the New Testament."

Licari said that Matthew used literary devices to show that Jesus was "the son of David, the messiah promised to the Jews," and also "the son of Abraham, the promised salvation for all people."

BESIDES RETURNING to the Old Testament, Matthew "introduces two new people," Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus.

Matthew makes Joseph a dreamer. While asleep, Joseph is told by an angel to "take Mary for your wife into your house, for the child begotten in her is through the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

The Joseph described by Matthew evokes memories of the Old Testament's Joseph, "son of Jacob who had been the instrument of salvation for the people of God... He had been a dreamer."

SAID LICARI, "Let us recall that Matthew — as well as Luke later — had no real history to go by for these beginnings, no birth certificate. He had no family pictures. For details they (Matthew and Luke) drew on the prophets who had foretold the Lord's coming, and they are told in the story in a backward fashion in the light of the resurrection..."

"So what we have in Matthew is not the bare factual account of the birth of the baby but the wondrous story written in faith, faith of the resurrection, of the birth of a child who would change the world."

Matthew's writing about the Magi, the wise men who went to the infant Jesus, does not have to be interpreted literally, but "this does not mean that it is not important or that there isn't some real important message there," said Licari.

SAID THE teacher, "Once again Matthew dips back into the history which his audience was well aware of.... Thus when the Magi cross the desert they are guided by a star just as the Israelites were guided by a pillar of fire out of Egypt, and they bring with them the universal recognition the messiah had come at last for all people, not just for the Jews."

In the infancy story, King Herod "reacts to the good news and its challenge as every ruler before him (in the Old Testament) had reacted. He orders the slaughter of the innocent children in hope of eradicating the newborn prophet before he can grow to transform the earth," Licari said.

Said Licari, "If we stop and reflect, it is really Luke's account in the infancy narratives that is used when we re-enact the Christmas story and rightly so, since it is Luke's account that has all the elements of drama from his knowledge of Greek drama."

LUKE DRAMATICALLY presents two annunciations — the announcement of the birth of "John the Baptist, the last in a long line of Old Testament prophets, and that of Jesus, the messiah for whom all the prophets had prepared the way."

In characterizing Mary, Luke's description "is so personal, so warmly revealing of her feelings and her spirit that it is easy to say that he knew Mary personally. Perhaps he had heard the story of Jesus from her lips.

"**FROM STUDY**, however, it seems that such a meeting would be highly unlikely, but it is a tribute to Luke's ability to flesh out the bits of early Christian tradition that he had concerning Jesus' family and to weave them together with the Old Testament...."

Licari said that Luke presents a "graphic image of the promise coming true" as he describes Mary's visit to Elizabeth, the mother-to-be of John the Baptist. "There they stand in Elizabeth's doorway, the two mothers, one carrying the last of the prophets and one the messiah himself — like the New Covenant embracing the Old."

LUKE'S NARRATIVE comes to a completion in describing the visit of Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus to the temple, where the old man Simeon and the holy woman Anna recognize Jesus as the messiah.

"While the parents of John the Baptist foreshadowed the joy of the good news, Simeon and Anna share in its completion.

"**SOON THE message** will die with them, only to grow with Jesus at Nazareth in wisdom and God's favor until the time when the messiah will show himself not only in the temple but on the road and in the hearts and in the spirit of all his people."

Said the teacher, "Plainly Matthew has ordered his narrative so that the link is unbroken from Joseph the dreamer through Moses the liberator to Jesus the messiah — from the promise through the suffering to the glory of the kingdom of God."

TALKING ABOUT Luke's gospel, the second account of the birth of Jesus, Licari said Luke's writing "is directed to the Gentiles, and thus he stressed the universality of the good news."

Luke was writing for "a different type of audience, and his approach had to be different. Luke's purpose was to serve as a colorful and poetic bridge between the Old and New Covenants. If Matthew wrote sort of a textbook, Luke wrote poetry.... Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus has an Oriental flavor while Luke's resembles more closely the traditions of a Greek drama."