

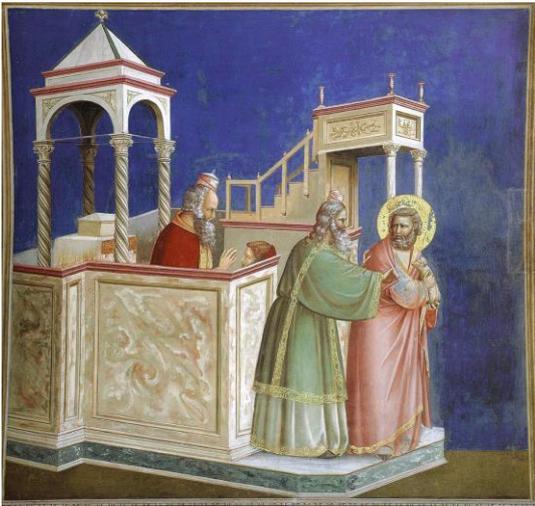
The Birth of Mary 8th September

Christians have often been tantalized by the lack of biographical data in the New Testament. The apocryphal "Gospel (or Protoevangelium) of James", written around 145, presents an elaborate account of the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus. According to this narrative Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, were of advanced years, but had no children. This was regarded as a sign of god's disapproval of a couple - as in various incidents in the OT, including the parents of Samuel (Anna and Hannah are versions of the same name). Accordingly Joachim was driven out of the Temple. However, while he was out in the countryside among the shepherds Anna was given an angelic vision revealing that they would have a child - Mary. In spite of condemnations from at least the 3rd century (St Thomas Aquinas actually refers to it as "apocryphal ravings") this text remained very popular, perhaps because of its combination of the domestic and (to later readers) exotic.

A very complete cycle of the life of Mary, based on this legend, occupies the topmost of three tiers in the decoration of the Arena Chapel in Padua - so called because it is on the site of a Roman arena. It is also known as the Scrovegni Chapel, since it was built by a wealthy Paduan banker, Enrico Scrovegni, who bought the land around 1300 and had built a luxury residence for himself, and the free-standing chapel. Since banking, which involved charging interest, was prohibited by the Church, it is plausibly suggested that guilt, and an attempt to make reparation, particularly for the sins of his father, whom Dante placed in Hell with moneybags slung around his neck, inspired Enrico's lavish spending, commissioning the leading artist of the day, Giotto di Bondone, to completely cover the interior of the chapel in true fresco painting. The work took around 625 days over two years and was completed in 1305, consecrated on 25th March (Annunciation). It is the masterwork of the most important artist of the early Renaissance, working with a team of about 40.



The cycle begins with Joachim expelled from the Temple. Holding the lamb which he has been refused permission to sacrifice, he is forced out into blank space. (Each of these panels is around 200 X 185 cm)



Downcast, he approaches a group of shepherds out in the countryside.



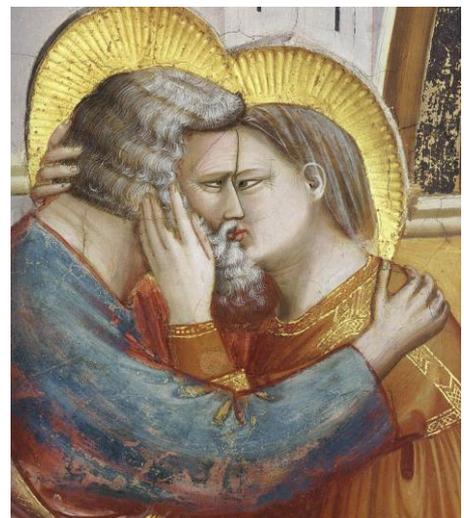
Back in the city, Anna receives an angelic visitor as she prays – this has been treated differently to the much more common images of the Annunciation to Mary.



Joachim offers his own sacrifice – the hand in the upper section and the presence of the angel indicate that though rejected by the priests it is accepted by God. Following the sacrifice he is visited by an angel in a dream.



On his return to the city, in one of Giotto's most powerful and original conceptions, he is met by Anna and the couple embrace – this is commonly known as The Meeting at the Golden Gate.



There follows the Birth of Mary, which is placed on the opposite wall, beginning the cycle of her life. The swaddled baby is shown being handed to the eager mother, and also being cared for by the midwives, while a gift is brought to the house – all typical features of childbed at the time.



Many artists took the opportunity to represent this birth in a way familiar to their viewers. Two very well-known examples are those by Domenico Ghirlandaio. The one below is in the Tornabuoni Chapel in Santa Maria Novella in Florence (c 1490) where the new mother is being visited by Ludovica Tornabuoni, daughter of the wealthy patron, in a classical Renaissance room.

