

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 3”

Matthew 1:18-25

When I sent out this morning's reading to the person who was going to sort out a reader, the e-mail reply that arrived read, "*I know the weather is bad but it looks like we've got to Christmas early!*" You may have had similar thoughts as those words were read just now. We don't normally hear those words in July. Mind you, there are hotels and other establishments that provide "Turkey & Tinsel" weekends during the summer for those who can't wait until Christmas, and just a couple of weeks ago Sally and I enjoyed a very nice Christmas pudding after our dinner. But maybe looking at these words now might not be such a bad idea. Some of you here may remember a man called Ralph Gower. He was the RE Inspector for the old and much-maligned Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). (I think he went on to be pastor of a Baptist Church in Lancashire.) When the then government brought in some changes to the curriculum and that meant that children looked at some of the Christian stories at times other than the traditional times, I remember hearing him saying what a good thing it was, because the Christmas and Easter stories could now be separated from Santa Claus and Easter bunnies and children could be taught what they were really all about.

So we can look at this story – and we'll be reading the rest of Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus over the next couple of weeks – without the distraction of tradition. What we read here we can consider without the images of robins, snowy cottages and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer flitting across our consciousness, and without the temptation to run through the Christmas card list or trying to remember if we've bought all the presents we need.

We've just started working our way through this Gospel of Matthew and last time we looked at it we read through the genealogy, the family tree of Jesus. And one of the things we've already noted is that Matthew is very eager to show his readers how the coming of Jesus fulfilled the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament. It was his way of helping the new Jewish followers of Jesus to see that the faith they had embraced was very much in line with what they already believed, and that this figure of Jesus is truly the expected Messiah, the King whom they had been looking for for so long. Just keep that in the back of your mind as we look at this passage this morning.

Just as Luke's story of the birth of Jesus has Mary as the main character, so Matthew has shaped his story around the character of Joseph. Joseph is referred to as the "*son of David*", a clear reference back to that genealogy, where Matthew has shown that Joseph is descended from King David. So, as Mary is Jesus' biological parent, Joseph is his legal parent. And we come across Joseph as he grapples with a fairly serious dilemma.

Before we go any further, maybe we ought just to say a few words about Jewish marriage customs in the first century, as that may help to explain why he finds himself in this bind. At this time, there were usually three steps in the marriage procedure. Firstly there was the *engagement*. That may well have been made while the couple were still children and was probably set up through a professional match-maker or through the parents – an arranged marriage, most often. As William Barclay puts it: "*Marriage was held to be far too serious a step to be left to the dictates of the human heart.*" Then there was the *betrothal*. That was, effectively, the ratification of the engagement. At this point, the engagement could be broken by the girl if she didn't want to go ahead with it, but once the betrothal was entered into, it was absolutely binding. It lasted for a year and the couple would be referred to as husband and wife, although they still lived with their parents and there was no sexual relationship. But the only way out of it was by divorce. Finally, there was the *marriage* proper, which took place at the end of that year and the two moved in together and their real married life began.

Mary and Joseph are at the betrothal stage – "*pledged to be married*". And at that point, Joseph finds his wife is pregnant. Clearly, he knows that he is not the father, so the only course of action open to him under the law is to divorce her. If he wants, he can make it very public, in which case Mary will be accused of adultery and the penalty for that is stoning. Matthew tells us that Joseph as "*a righteous man*"

– he wanted to do right by the law – yet he didn't want to disgrace her, so he was going to “*divorce her quietly*”. He'd do right by the law and ensure that she was protected from shame.

At that point God speaks to him to reassure him. As Joseph is dreaming, God speaks through a messenger, an angel, and tells him that it's OK. Joseph can take Mary as his wife because this is all part of God's plan. It must have been a very vivid dream to have the effect that it did, but Joseph responds by going ahead with the marriage and sticking by Mary despite the unusual circumstances of her pregnancy.

And with this reassurance, God tells Joseph what the name of the baby is to be – and why. He is to call him Jesus, which was a fairly common name at the time. Jesus is a Greek version of the Hebrew name Yehoshua (Joshua), sometimes shortened to Yeshua. And it means “Yahweh (God) saves”. The reason for this is that this baby will grow up to “*save his people from their sins*”.

Then Matthew gives us one of these little formulae which you may recall we said are sprinkled through his book – “*All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet*”. This is what God had foretold would happen through the preachers of the Old Testament, the Hebrew prophets. And Matthew points his readers back to some words in *Isaiah 7:14*. The prophet talks of a virgin falling pregnant and giving birth to a son. Now we could go off at a tangent here and spend ages discussing the virgin birth – or the virgin conception, as it really should be – and talk about the way Matthew translates the words of Isaiah, but I'll leave you to have fun with that at your housegroups. The interesting thing is that Isaiah uses another name for what is obviously the same person – Emmanuel. That's actually a Hebrew phrase meaning “*God with us*” and wasn't a common name – in fact, it was unique to Jesus at this time because it would have been a very presumptuous thing to name your child “God with us”. But what Matthew seems to be suggesting here is that having a saviour means having God with us.

As Jesus, this new child will be a saviour, he will “*save us from our sins*”. And he does that in three areas, let me suggest. Firstly, he saves us from **the consequences of our sins**. The Bible is clear throughout – and nowhere more explicitly than in *Romans 3:23* – that everyone has sinned. We all do things wrong, we say things wrong, we harbour wrong attitudes. Ever since the time of the first human beings, portrayed in *Genesis* as Adam and Eve, we have been making the wrong choices, making the wrong decisions. And the Bible is equally clear that God, in his desire to eradicate evil, has vowed to destroy anything that is tainted by sin. So there's not a lot of hope, really. God's promised to punish anything sinful – and we're all sinful. So, depending on your view of hell and damnation, we all face the prospect of at best eternal separation from God and at worst constant, everlasting torment. Whichever way you look at it, the consequences of sin are pretty dire and it really would be very nice if we could find a way of being saved from that.

And Jesus, by standing in for us as he died on the cross of Golgotha, has actually achieved that. He took the punishment that was rightfully ours in order to spare us from the consequences of our sinful behaviour and attitudes. If we accept what he did for us there, and decide to put our sin behind us, then we can look forward to an eternity spent with him in his Kingdom, enjoying the presence of God and the absence of evil for evermore.

But, secondly, Jesus saves us from **the power of sin**. Again, there is a very clear passage in Paul's *Letter to The Romans*, in which he writes of his own struggle with the power of sin (it's in *Romans 7:15ff*). It's as if sin has a powerful hold over him and he can't help himself doing wrong, even when he knows better and wants to do right. In a sense, what it means is that we are held hostage by the power of our selfish nature and we seem to adopt the default position whenever faced with a choice between good and evil and end up making the wrong choice, almost in spite of ourselves. Indeed, before we encounter Jesus, it's almost as if we *need* to sin. It's easier to go with the flow, to yield to temptation, than to resist and follow God's way.

Jesus, again as he died on the cross, broke that power decisively once and for all. He gave us back the choice of doing good. As he struggled with the powers of evil, he overcame them and ensured that we

now have a real choice between good and evil. Of course, we can still choose to follow the way of sin, but there's now a way out – *“a way back to God from the dark paths of sin”*, as the old song puts it. We can ask for his help, his power to liberate us from patterns of behaviour that were always going to lead to judgement. We have freedom in Christ, in Jesus, because he, the only truly sinless person ever to have lived, has broken that power.

And then, thirdly, Jesus saves us from **the effects of sin**. A world in which evil is rampant, in which the default option is being selfish and from which there seems to be no escape, a life which seems to be leading inexorably towards an eternity cut off from God, banished from his Kingdom, is a world which has a powerful effect on us. We are always affected by our context, our environment. You get used to life in Lichfield, don't you? It's clean and peaceful and largely unhurried. But if you go down to London you find yourself swept along in a frenzy of crowds and noise and dirt, rushing along even when you don't need to. It has an effect on you. And a world which seems to have no hope, no prospect of anything beyond the present, is a world of despair and a world in which it seems as if there really is no need to look after anyone else other than yourself – after all, why should you bother? So we find ourselves with a great sense of fear about the future, and a feeling of alienation very often. Let us eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die – and we'll die alone, inevitably and unstoppably, victims of our own worldviews and our own philosophies.

But Jesus has come into that desperate and difficult world as Emmanuel – he is God with us in our vulnerability, our fragility, our failure and our hopelessness. He helps us to make sense of it all. He stands by us so that we don't have to fend for ourselves, so that we do not have to shoulder all the responsibility for our decisions and choices: he guides us. He lifts our gaze above the desperate and the absurd to the prospect of a brighter future – and a future that will be brighter for ever, not only for this life. As we acknowledge and accept that Jesus has come to make a positive difference to our lives and to our world, so we can begin to sense his presence with us, the presence of God in our everyday lives. He helps us deal with the effects of living in a broken and fragmented world.

You see, that's Jesus' core purpose – to be God with us so that we can have hope. And his conception and birth are so unique, so wonderfully different from what you'd expect, to make it clear that there is something very special going on here. Don Carson in his comments on these verses writes that Matthew is *“not saying something vague, such as ‘Jesus was so wonderful that there must be a touch of the divine about him,’ but rather ‘Jesus is the promised Messiah of the line of David, and he is Emmanuel, “God with us”, because his birth was the result of God’s supernatural intervention, making Jesus God’s very Son; and his early months were stamped with strange occurrences which, in the light of subsequent events, weave a coherent pattern of theological truths and historical attestation to divine providence in the matter’.”*

Matthew doesn't mention stables or mangers or shepherds or angelic choirs. He didn't write this to be pulled out once a year and read by candlelight while children sing and sleigh bells ring. He wrote this to demonstrate just what an amazing God we serve and what an amazing Saviour we have. We're not left alone in the cosmos to make the best of a bad job, but we have Jesus making God real to us day by day as we see those glimpses of his Kingdom breaking in on us from all around.

And what's more, Jesus promised that that would continue. It wasn't just for Joseph and his day – not even for the people of Judea scattered around to world and throughout time. At the end of this gospel, Matthew draws the strings together as Jesus says to those who take him seriously, *“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”*. May you know his saving presence with you today.

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Questions for discussion

1. Does it matter that Jesus was "born of a virgin"? Why/why not? Matthew uses the Greek word for "virgin" when Isaiah uses the Hebrew word which means "girl of marriageable age". Does that make any difference?
2. What do you understand by being "saved from your sins"? How important is that to you?
3. In what ways can we know God with us? Share any personal experiences you may have had.
4. Does reading this story at a time other than Christmas help you? Why/why not?
5. Has anything particularly struck you in this passage?