

MATTHEW 1:18-25

ST JOHN'S, 18.12.16, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

Who is this Jesus? Where does he come from? Why did he come? These are the questions which Matthew answers in the first two chapters of his gospel. He begins quite abruptly with Jesus' genealogy: *This is the list of the ancestors of Jesus Christ . . .(1:1)*, and then moves equally abruptly into our passage this morning: *This was how the birth of Jesus Christ took place* (v 18).

In our passage there are three answers to the question 'Who is this baby?' He's Immanuel, he's Jesus, and he's Christ. So let's think some more about why Matthew stresses these titles or names for the baby who was born to Mary.

IMMANUEL

Matthew tells the story very briefly. Joseph and Mary were betrothed, she was found to be pregnant, and a messenger from God prevented Joseph from breaking their betrothal. Then Matthew says: *Now all this happened to make what the Lord had said through the prophet come true, "A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel" (which means "God is with us")* (vv 22-23).

Matthew's very concerned to show that the events of Jesus' birth fulfil OT prophecy. This is the first time he refers to a specific OT Scripture – he does so another five times just in the first four chapters of his gospel. The OT verse here is Isaiah 7:14, which we heard as part of our first reading this morning.

We know that Jesus never bore the name Immanuel. But he clearly played the role of bringing God's presence to humankind. Not only that, Jesus is in essence 'God with us'. Jesus isn't just another prophet – like John the Baptist, or Mohammed; he's not just another great teacher, like Paul, or Gandhi. Jesus is Immanuel, 'God with us', "God with skin on"¹, God come in person to live with us, to share our human condition. Matthew sets out here, right at the beginning of his gospel, that this Jesus is unique.

Matthew has shown, both by the genealogy, and by his account of the unusual circumstances of Jesus' birth, that this is no ordinary human baby. Matthew says that Mary *was going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit* (v 18) – biologically, there was no human father involved. Joseph, being *a man who always did what was right* (v 19), couldn't contemplate going ahead with his marriage to a woman who'd been unfaithful to him. It took a messenger from God himself to convince Joseph to marry Mary and to acknowledge the baby as his own.

All this happened, Matthew tells us, *to make what the Lord had said through the prophet come true* (v 22). All the events surrounding Jesus' unusual birth point us to one conclusion: this baby is Immanuel, 'God with us', the son of God himself.

JESUS

The angel who appeared to Joseph told him that Mary *will have a son, and you will name him Jesus – because he will save his people from their sins* (v 21). Names in the Bible are often full of meaning, and that's even more true of a name which has been revealed by the Lord.

The name 'Jesus' was a common name; it's the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, or Yeshua. It sounds like the Hebrew word *yôšî'â*, 'he will save'. Jesus, or Joshua, probably means 'Yahweh is salvation', or 'God to the rescue'. In the OT, God frequently rescued his people, and at one stage he used a man with the same name, Joshua.

Matthew's very careful to include in his explanation of Jesus' name the fact that *he will save his people from their sins* (v 21). The Jews had been expecting the Messiah; they were even expecting him to be a Saviour. But they weren't expecting the Messiah to save them from their sins. They were expecting the Messiah to save them from the oppressive régime of the Romans, from being a small and insignificant nation. They were expecting Messiah to restore to his people the greatness they'd enjoyed back in the days of David, to restore them to a position of political power and influence in the world. So Matthew emphasizes that saving his people from their sins was indeed the mission which God entrusted to Jesus, even before he was born.

The two parts of Jesus' mission, to be 'God with us', and to 'save his people from their sins', are closely linked. People are separated from God's presence by sin; Jesus has come to remove that barrier, and so to allow his people to be with God.

CHRIST

Matthew's also very clear that Mary's baby is the Christ, or Messiah, God's Anointed One. In 1:1 we read, *This is the list of the ancestors of Jesus Christ*. In 1:18, Matthew writes, *This was how the birth of Jesus*

Christ took place. And Matthew is at pains to show the basis of his identification of Mary's baby as the long-awaited Messiah.

The Messiah was prophesied to be a descendant of David. The Lord had promised David a never-ending dynasty (2 Samuel 7:16), and there are various times when the promise of a coming Saviour-King from among David's descendants is reiterated; Isaiah 11 is one famous example, and Jeremiah writes, *The Lord says, "The time is coming when I will choose as king a righteous descendant of David . . . He will be called 'the Lord our Salvation' (Jeremiah 23:5, 6)*. So, for Jesus' credentials as the Messiah to be valid, he needed Joseph to acknowledge him and to give him his name. Without Joseph's acceptance, Jesus wouldn't legally have been a *descendant of David*. Matthew shows us how God intervened in the story, to make sure that this is what happened, even though Joseph wanted to break his betrothal to Mary. And as I've already said, even in his account of Jesus' birth, Matthew hints that Jesus won't be the kind of Messiah for which the Jewish people had been looking.

CONCLUSION

Jesus, Messiah, son of God, son of David, Immanuel – Matthew is clear in this passage that Mary's baby will be all these things. He's also clear that *he will save his people from their sins*. This is the message of Christmas, the great good news of the gospel. In John's words, *God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life* (John 3:16). In the words of one of my favourite Christmas carols:

Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
all for love's sake becamest poor.
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,
sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.²

This baby is Immanuel, 'God with us', "God with skin on". Almighty God has come among us, in the form of a tiny baby; the creator of the universe came to share the pain and sadness and frustration of our life. Our heavenly Father loves us enough to allow his only Son to be at the mercy of those who would reject him and kill him, just to destroy the barriers we've put up that separate us from his presence. Brothers and sisters, all this happened, not just to fulfil Scripture, but to make it possible for you and me to be saved from our sins. So, this Christmas, let's be filled with awe and wonder and praise; let's adore him, let's worship him, let's give him the glory, and most of all let's give him our hearts and our lives.

¹ Mandy Harvey (Cinnamon Network's Ambassador for Wales), in her keynote address to the St Asaph Diocesan Conference, 10.10.15:
<https://youtu.be/DJKm1T7cdZc>

² Frank Houghton (1894 – 1972); copyright © Overseas Missionary Fellowship