

# Northolt Park Baptist Church

## The Christmas Jesus – Matthew 1-2

### *Jesus Completes God's Plan of Salvation*

Over the Christmas period, we will be looking at the first two chapters of Matthew's gospel. We won't be going through the chapters in detail or in order, looking at every verse, like we often do. Instead, we will be flying high over the two chapters, having a look at some of the *themes* that come out of them, the different threads that Matthew weaves through this section of his gospel where he tells us about the early life of Jesus.

I'd like us to do this, because for the most part, we come to these chapters only at Christmas time, and sometimes we just *read* them, or *hear* them read in church, and not really *reflect* on them. Or perhaps there's a danger that our minds are filled with so many cutesy Christmasy thoughts that we sentimentalise them.

But, of course, the stories are not cutesy or sentimental. Unlike the colourful scenes on many Christmas cards, Matthew has no manger, no glowing picture of mother and child, not even shepherds or angel choirs. He has Magi, of course, which has inspired scenes of camels, and kings in exotic clothes, but they certainly weren't kings and probably weren't so wise either, and so the mood isn't nearly as colourful as we've sometimes been led to believe.

In fact, the reality is that it's a story of vicious court intrigue, the threat of despotic power, the bitter realities of murder, the mysterious ways of God in allowing baby boys to be murdered, young families forced into exile. Not the kinds of scenes that most people would like to see on Christmas cards.

So, it's clear that Matthew tells the stories not primarily because of their *sentiment*, but because of their *significance*. And that's what we want to think about as we roam over the opening two chapters – to see how he builds

up a rich tapestry of who Jesus is, and the significance of Jesus for those who believe in him – not just significance at Christmastime, but significance for *lifetime*.

So, we're going to think about three things from these chapters, one thing this week and two further things over the next two weeks. Today's theme is this: *Jesus completes God's plan of salvation*.

How do we know Matthew is interested in telling us that Jesus completes God's plan of salvation? Partly because he tells us – five times explicitly – that Jesus came to fulfil the Scriptures. After the genealogy in 1:1-17, there are *five* distinct sections each with a quotation from the Old Testament which Matthew says that Jesus has fulfilled.

The first one is in 1:22-23. Notice how explicit Matthew is in verse 22; he's wanting to make it absolutely clear to his readers that what God promised through the prophet Isaiah years ago *has now come to pass* in Jesus. Centuries before, Isaiah promised that the birth of a child will confirm God's covenant relationship with Israel. Well now that promise has finally come to pass – the birth of *this child* means the presence of God in mercy, the coming of the golden age of salvation – God with us.

He does the same in the other quotations too. The second one is in the account of the Magi visiting Jesus (2:5-6 – that comes from Micah). The third one is in the section in 2:13-15 which describes how Joseph and Mary escape with Jesus to Egypt (2:14-15 – that comes from Hosea). The fourth one is in the next part of the story which tells how Herod ordered the execution of baby boys in and around the area of Bethlehem (2:17-18 – that comes from Jeremiah). And the final one is from the last part of chapter 2 which describes the settling of the family in Nazareth (2:23). This one is

interesting, because there is no passage in the Old Testament which says 'He will be called a Nazarene'!

So, it's fairly easy to see, even though we might not fully understand all the implications and significances of these passages from the Old Testament, that Matthew is wanting to show again and again and again and again and again (five times in all!) that God is making good on the promises he made to his people through the prophets, and those promises are coming to their fruition in Jesus.

But, if we look more closely at these chapters, we'll be able to see that Matthew has a lot more to say. He provides a number of different windows through which we can look to see the significance of Jesus as the one who completes God's plan of salvation. We'll look at four of them.

### **1. Creation: a new beginning for the world**

Look at the very first verse, chapter 1, verse 1: 'A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ', or more literally, 'the book of the *genesis*, the beginning, of Jesus Christ'. When John starts his gospel with the words, 'In the beginning was the word' (John 1:1), we can see that he wants us to think about Genesis, when all things began. But Matthew too is reminding us about Genesis. Genesis 5:1 speaks of 'the book of the genesis of human beings', and Matthew speaks of 'the book of the genesis of Jesus Christ', placing the story he is about to tell in the larger story of God's dealings not just with Israel, but with the whole of *creation*. And Matthew is marking a new beginning in that story, a new beginning in Jesus.

And then, also in verse 1 we have the mention of two important personalities from the Old Testament (1:1) – Abraham and David – so let's think about them for a moment.

### **2. Abraham: the promised blessing for the world**

Way back in Genesis 12:1-3, when God called Abraham, he promised him that through his family the whole world would be blessed. When the Bible speaks of people being *blessed*, it means that they are looked after by God in a

special way, that they are looked on favourably by God. And God promised that someone from Abraham's family would *bless* all nations and all peoples in the world. Matthew tells us in the very first verse that Jesus comes from Abraham's family. It is Jesus who is the promised descendant of Abraham who would bring blessing to the whole world.

### **3. David: a shepherd king for the world**

And then there is David too. If Abraham was the *father* of Israel, David was *king* over Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, before the birth of Jesus, God promised that he would send a king like David to rule over his people with justice and peace, to be a shepherd to them and to rule over the whole world. The Jewish people had been waiting for God to do this for hundreds of years. Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is the one they've been waiting for.

And then, as we've seen, later in chapter 2, Matthew shows how Jesus fulfils God's promise of a king, a Son of David. When the Magi ask where the king is to be born, the chief priests and the teachers of the law know the answer. The king, the Messiah, the Anointed One, will be born in Bethlehem, the town of David (2:5-6). And that too is significant on the biblical landscape. A long time after David has died, God promises through Micah that one will come from Bethlehem (the town where David was born) who will shepherd the people of Israel. Who is this? Jesus Christ, great David's greater son.

### **4. Israel: a saved people in the world**

What comes after the first verse? From verse 2 all the way down to verse 16, Matthew provides a family tree for Jesus, going through Abraham, David, the time of the exile, right up to Jesus, and he summarises it for us in verse 17. A list of forty or so generations is not particularly riveting reading for us, but Matthew will not allow us to eavesdrop on the announcement of Jesus' conception and the visit of the Magi until we make our way through Jesus' genealogy. He wants us to recognise what he is doing in tracing Jesus' ancestry through Abraham and David, to see

that Jesus' roots go right back to the very beginning of Israel's history, a history which God has been working out, even in the darkest times, and bringing to its culmination, leading up to this birth.

It's probably significant that each of the four quotations in chapter 2 contains a reference to a *place* – Bethlehem, Egypt, Ramah and Nazareth. And here's an interesting thing: three of the places would remind readers of decisive moments in the history of Israel: Bethlehem was the town of David; Egypt was associated with the exodus. Ramah was associated with Israel's exile. It was the place where Jacob's wife Rachel was buried, and when the Israelites were being carried off into exile, they passed Rachel's tomb, and she is pictured as weeping for them as they are forced to go to Babylon. (Remember – Matthew has already mentioned the exile as part of Jesus' genealogy, in 1:11-12, 17.)

So, by connecting Jesus' origins with these places, Matthew is making it clear that Jesus' story is rooted in the story of Israel – just as he said in his genealogy too. That might help us with that final puzzling reference to Nazareth in 2:23. If Jesus really is the Messiah, why is he called 'the Nazarene', and associated with Galilee? Matthew makes it clear that each move was a fulfilment of Scripture.

•••

So the significance of Jesus is not just there in the direct quotations from the Old Testament. It's there in the shape of the whole story of the people of Israel which goes back through the exile, through David, through Abraham, and has its roots in God's purposes for the whole of creation. This is the one towards which the story of Israel and the nations, indeed the whole world, has been moving.

And this family history which shaped Jesus' identity becomes *our* family history as well. We perhaps need to recapture some of that for ourselves as God's people today. Do I really think my life has any purpose? Any meaning? Do I honestly think I'm significant? The Christmas story says I am. I am one on whom the end of the ages has come! I am one who finds my identity, with others, in the one who stands at the heart of God's plan for the universe! The Christmas story tells me so – even if you won't find it on any card.

It reminds us that the coming of Jesus was not an afterthought in the mind of God. It was not a Plan B put into effect when Plan A failed. The coming of Jesus brings to a culmination God's great plan of salvation, of which we are privileged to be a part.

So, this Christmastime, let's enjoy the rich portrait of Jesus Matthew provides in these chapters – the one who completes God's work of salvation – the Son of Abraham; the Son of David; the Messiah; the true king; the true Israel; the Saviour, the one who saves his people from their sins; Emmanuel, God with us.

*Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 16 December 2007.*