

Northolt Park Baptist Church

The Christmas Jesus – Matthew 1-2

Jesus Comes for the Whole World

Over this Christmas period we are spending a few weeks in the first two chapters of Matthew's gospel – not to go through the passages in detail, but to get a flavour of some of the themes Matthew is concerned to weave through his account of birth of Jesus. We have suggested that one of the dangers of the cutesy images on Christmas cards is that they inoculate us against what's really being said in the stories. What we want to do, then, is look again, perhaps look a little more deeply, so that we can enjoy the rich portrait of Jesus Matthew offers us.

So, we began last time with the first major theme which runs through these chapters which is that Jesus completes God's plan of salvation. We saw how five times in all Matthew deliberately cites a passage from the Old Testament and explicitly tells us that Jesus fulfilled that Scripture. But, we said, the significance of Jesus is also 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.

So, Jesus' coming marks a new *creation*, a new beginning for the world. He is the Son of *Abraham*, who brings the promised blessing for the world. He is the Son of *David*, who is a shepherd king for the world. And he brings the history of the nation of *Israel* to its culmination by saving his people from their sins. So, at Christmastime, we celebrate the arrival of the one towards which the story of Israel and the nations, indeed the whole world, has been moving.

At some level, we just have to sit back and bask in how amazing that is! The coming of Jesus brings to a culmination God's great plan of salvation, of which we are privileged to be a part – each of us who know Jesus.

But that was last week's theme. What's this week's theme? It is this: *Jesus comes for the whole world*. Right at the outset, Matthew shows that Jesus comes for gentiles (that's most or all of us in this church) as well as for Jews, a theme which runs through the gospel and comes to a climax in the closing scene, where the disciples are sent out to make disciples of all nations (see 28:18-20). But this theme also comes through in a number of different ways in these two chapters, and we will look at three of them.

1. The promise made to Abraham

We have already mentioned this. But it's so important it's worth saying again, because this is where the New Testament starts. So let's look again at Matthew 1:1. Matthew begins with Jesus as the Son of David, the king of Israel, and the Son of Abraham, the father of Israel, the one through whom God promised he would bless *all nations*. God's promise to Abraham was not just that he would have a son – Isaac – but that through his offspring, his seed, *all nations* would be blessed. So, Abraham does not stand just at the head of the nation of the Jews, then, but also at the head of *all nations*. The titles for Jesus show him as the fulfilment not only of the hopes of Israel's king – David – but also as one who will extend God's blessings to Gentiles. Jesus' birth marks a new era in human history, when God is finally making good on the promise he made to Abraham all those years ago.

2. The foreignness of the women

Not only does Abraham begin the genealogy, but the genealogy itself includes a number of women. And what women! He mentions Tamar in verse 3, Rahab and Ruth in verse 5, and Bathsheba in verse 6 – although he doesn't mention her by name.

As most Jewish genealogies did not include women, their presence here is quite surprising. It's all the more surprising given the mention of *these particular* women. Why these ones? There are several possible answers to this question, and one is that they are all gentiles; they are all foreigners to Israel, who came within the orbit of the people of God. Tamar was a Canaanite; Rahab was a Canaanite; Ruth belonged to hated pagan Moab; Bathsheba, like her husband we presume, was a Hittite. So, maybe Matthew is showing by including these foreign women that Jesus would be the saviour not just of the Jews, but of men and women without any racial distinction. The women are representative of gentiles to whom the Gospel would eventually go. They are reminders on the opening page of the New Testament that Jesus comes for the whole world.

3. The worship of the Magi

Then in chapter 2, we have the *magi*. What is really striking about these characters is that they are *gentiles* looking for a new-born Jewish king! The magi are astrologers from the east, outsiders to the faith, outsiders to biblical prophecies, but who follow the star and find the king, who offer him worship. One of the main features of the story is the contrast between the acceptance of the new king of the Jews by foreign gentile worshippers, and the rejection of him by the Jewish ruler and others in Jerusalem.

Just as the nations traveled to hear the wisdom of Solomon (1 Kings 4:34; 10:1-10), so now the magi come from among the gentiles with tribute for the one who is greater than Solomon. And the east-to-west movement is a movement back toward God. Traveling probably from Persia in the east to Israel, the magi are following the footsteps of Abraham, traveling to the promised land.

There are many promises in the Old Testament that the way of covenant membership, the way of salvation, would be made available not just to the Jews, but to all the nations. There is the promise in Isaiah 2:1-4 that in the last days, the Lord would raise up Mount Zion, and the nations would come streaming to it. And then

at the end of Isaiah, when he describes a new Jerusalem at the centre of a new heaven and a new earth, we read that the glory of the nations will flow to Jerusalem (66:12) and all nations will see the Lord's glory (66:18-19). Gentile magi are privileged to witness the beginning of the fulfilment of God's plan for the world.

But we can say a little more about these figures. Again, part of the problem with these stories is that many of us have heard them so many times, we think we know them really well, so that as soon as we start reading the passage, we tune it out, thinking 'I already know that story'. Part of the issue is that a number of traditions have become attached to the story.

First of all, we tend to assume they were *men*. I imagine a number have already heard what would have happened if they had been *women* rather than men? Well, they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole and brought practical gifts!

How many of them are there? Many people think they know the answer and will answer 'three'. Again, some have their doubts – like the piece of graffiti, presumably written by a sceptical woman, which asks: 'Three wise men?!' Three might be right, or it might not be right. Matthew doesn't tell us. The number three comes from later tellings of the story, based on the number of gifts Matthew describes.

At Christmas, we sometimes sing 'We three kings of Orient are'. But Matthew doesn't say that they are kings. He calls them 'magi'. Magi were a number of different things, but they were certainly *not* kings. The Bible translation we read in the church actually uses the word 'magi' to identify these characters. Some other translations use the phrase 'wise men', but that is probably being too kind, and is misleading. We probably shouldn't think of them as wise men.

Originally, in Persia, magi were interpreters of dreams. By the first century, the term referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, or star-gazers. In fact, our words 'magic' and 'magician' come

from this word 'magi'. So, they were certainly not kings, and possibly not even 'wise men', but horoscope fanatics – a practice which is condemned in the Bible. It might be more helpful to compare them to people in fortune-teller booths, people who try to tell the future by stars, tea leaves, chicken gizzards, Tarot cards, and so on. In the Bible, think of the magicians in Egypt at the time of Moses, or the interpreters of dreams in the book of Daniel, or Simon the magician in Acts 8.

So, for an early reader of Matthew's gospel, the magi aren't just gentiles; they represent the height of gentile idolatry and religious hocus-pocus. But it's these star-gazing, horoscope-writing, would-be magicians who are the heroes in Matthew's story. They shouldn't be there. They don't worship the right God. They don't belong to the right religion or the right race. And yet they are there.

It's possible that Matthew intended the magi to look like bungling astrologers or sorcerers, more like the Three Stooges than the Three Wise Men! They go to the wrong place. They speak to the wrong person. When they give their gifts, they give gold, frankincense and myrrh, which were elements used in their magic. *And yet*, by a mysterious combination of God's loving grace and their faithful seeking, they are there – as models of seeking Jesus, believing in Jesus, and worshipping Jesus with what they have and know. God used what they knew – the *star* – and gave them what they perhaps didn't know – the *Scriptures* – to bring them to Jesus.

The story of the magi shows us that God revealed the truth about Jesus to a bunch of pagan fools – morally and spiritually speaking – while those who were clever enough to work it out for themselves missed it. The story of the magi reminds us that God shows his strength in our weakness, his glory in our humility, his wisdom in our folly, to make it clear that everything comes from him and not from ourselves.

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There we have it, then. The Christmas Jesus comes for the whole world. Whether it's in the promise made to Abraham, in the foreignness

of the women in Jesus' ancestry, or the worship of the magi, it becomes clear that Jesus' mission of saving his people from their sins will reach beyond the borders of Israel to embrace the whole world.

Psalm 130 promises that God will save Israel from her sins. Here, Jesus is the saviour, and will save his people from their sins, echoed when he breaks bread and pours wine – 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'. Jesus' beginning and his naming is bound up with his destiny – the cross. And its effects reach across boundaries. So, the Christmas story has something to say of one who came to earth for *all*, and whose love in his birth and life, as well as his death, embraces *all*.

I suggest we not only need to *believe* that great truth about Jesus, but to *enjoy* it, to allow it to *shape* us as individuals, to give it room to *transform* the way we think about church and mission.

And Matthew gives a strong hint that Jesus' coming demands a response. Like the magi, we are called to *seek* and we are called to *worship*. As the first gentiles to worship Jesus, the magi represent millions of men and women throughout the ages and throughout the world – including ourselves – who have been drawn to Christ, who have got there and thought 'At last!', and have offered him their devotion. Christmas is always a call to worship, to lay ourselves before Jesus, to worship him, and to adore him, Christ the Lord. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 23 December 2007.