

# Northolt Park Baptist Church

## The Christmas Jesus – Matthew 1-2

### *Jesus Challenges Ideas of Social Status and Power*

We have been looking at the first two chapters of Matthew's gospel, asking what they have to tell us about the Christmas Jesus, trying to see what threads Matthew begins to weave as he starts telling the story of Jesus.

In our first week, we said that one thing Matthew wants to tell us is that *Jesus completes God's plan of salvation*. He cites passages from the Old Testament, and says that Jesus came to fulfil them. And, in other ways, he reminds us that Jesus fulfils God's purposes for the whole of *creation*, Jesus fulfils God's promise to *Abraham* that his descendants would bring blessing to all nations, Jesus fulfils God's guarantee that a Son of *David* would reign on the throne of King David forever, and Jesus fulfils the history of the nation of *Israel* and brings that history to its culmination.

Last week, we saw that *Jesus comes for the whole world*. We can see that in the promise made to Abraham, in the foreignness of the women in the genealogy, and especially in the pagan astrologers who seek him, and make the long journey to him in order to worship him.

What we can begin to see with these themes, perhaps, is that Matthew has not just thrown these stories together any old how. Rather, he has carefully arranged them to bring out some unifying threads. And, if we had the time to follow them, we would see that the threads continue into the rest of the gospel right through to the last page: Jesus completes God's plan of salvation, and Jesus comes for the whole world.

And so we come to this third and final week, and a third theme which stretches across these chapters and into the rest of the gospel, and it is this: *Jesus challenges ideas of social status and power*. This too is significant for Matthew. At the time of Jesus and Matthew, people had all sorts of ideas as to what the Messiah, the king,

the Son of David, should be like. What Matthew does is rewrite the script; he tells us what the true king is *really* like; he recasts the identity and character of the Messiah, and challenges ideas of social status and power in the process.

There are at least four ways Matthew does this in these opening chapters.

#### **1. Mary – and Jesus' irregular ancestry**

We have Jesus' ancestry laid out for us in the genealogy in 1:1-17. We said last time that we do *not* anticipate the mention of the women in the genealogy. Not only are they *women* (which is significant), and not only are they *gentiles* (which, as we saw last time, is also significant), but each woman, including Mary, has the whiff of sexual scandal hanging over her; the women are united by *suspensions of illegitimacy* surrounding their unions and childbearing.

Let's remind ourselves about Tamar, for example, who is mentioned in 1:3. Her story is told in Genesis 38. She is Judah's daughter-in-law; she has two husbands who die, and Judah won't give his sons to her so that she can have descendants. So, she disguises herself as a prostitute, and ends up getting pregnant by Judah, her father-in-law! But it's through this sordid incident that Perez is born, and from Perez eventually comes David, and from David eventually comes Jesus! God works through this soap-opera incident in the history of his people, and Tamar and her son Perez become part of Christ's family tree.

And then, later, although she is a prostitute, Rahab is brought into the messianic line. And although a Moabite outsider, with no right to marry an Israelite (not least recalling that the Moabites had their origins in the incest between Lot and his two daughters), Ruth becomes the grandmother of king David. And

then comes David himself, and his illicit relationship with the wife of Uriah, Bathsheba. But God chooses to work through one of David's lowest points, and Solomon continues the line to Christ.

And so it is that Mary is found to be pregnant before she and Joseph come together (1:18). She is an engaged young woman, pregnant with a child not fathered by Joseph, her betrothed husband. Here is a potential sexual scandal right at the beginning of the gospel! But Matthew includes key women from Israel's history in his genealogy to show that similar suspicions surrounded them too.

What a family tree! Jesus is the Messiah, not through respectable and expected channels, but under a cloud of sexual scandal. Why would God choose to make Mary pregnant so long before her marriage that she would become subject to gossip, humiliation, and possible divorce? Why would God not want the birth of Jesus to fall inside the boundaries of what was morally and socially acceptable? Why would God allow Jesus' origins to be subjected to the whispers of sexual scandal and accusations of illegitimacy. We have to say that we don't really know. But, as Matthew reminds us, God doesn't always work out his purpose within the boundaries of public respectability and expectations. His work can take the form of scandal and risk. He will work through Tamar's deception of Judah and David's adultery with Bathsheba – not to say those things are alright, but to show that nothing will stop his plan of salvation coming to fruition.

So, the suggestion of *illegitimacy* fits well with the inclusion of Mary in the genealogy; but it also fits well with the next incident in 1:18-25.

## 2. Joseph – as Jesus' adoptive father

The theme of illegitimacy continues here. As we go through the genealogy, we have the pattern that 'so and so was the father of so and so, so and so was the father of so and so', and when we come to verse 16, we might expect to read 'and Joseph was the father of Jesus', but we don't. Matthew seems to go out of his way to say that Joseph was *not* the father of Jesus.

What becomes clear in 1:18-25 is that Joseph *adopts* Jesus.

The Messiah comes from the line of king David as the genealogy makes clear, and so it's important that it's mentioned that Joseph is a son of David (1:20). And, having considered whether to divorce Mary quietly, an angel persuades Joseph to take Mary as his wife, and to give her son the name Jesus, all of which, we are told, Joseph does (1:24-25). So, Matthew tells us how Jesus came to be formally adopted and named by Joseph, and so to become officially a 'son of David'.

## 3. Herod – and Jesus' true kingship

Suspicions of illegitimacy continue beyond chapter 1, into chapter 2, where there is a deliberate contrast between two kings – Jesus and Herod. Who is the legitimate king? Herod may well be king *legally*, but he is not the *legitimate* king.

Following on from last week, we need to note that the different responses to Jesus' birth are not just a contrast between unbelieving Jews and believing gentiles (although that appears to be present to some extent). But the contrast is also a social or a political one, a status division, between those who have the *power*, like Herod and the religious elite, and those who are apparently *powerless* and insignificant and on the margins, like pagan astrologers, Joseph and Mary.

So, here we have what we referred to earlier as the rewriting of the messianic script. What kind of king will Jesus be? Most of the references are to Jesus as 'the child'. And he is entirely passive: he is born of Mary, announced by a star, worshipped, presented with gifts by the magi, sought by Herod, taken to Egypt, taken back to Israel. He is a *powerless* refugee child, whose life is in danger, and who has to flee the country.

Herod, by contrast shows all the characteristics of power: he orders people, questions them, makes them do his bidding, brings fear and death. It will take the rest of the story to tell us that Jesus' life will be shaped by a different power. Jesus will teach his disciples to love their enemies and not to return violence with

violence (6:38-48; 26:51-54). His power will be exercised in healing, in liberating those gripped by demonic forces. His kingship will be demonstrated not by killing or ordering the killing of others, but in dying so that others may have life – because that’s the kind of king he is. His power is shown not in violence but in vulnerability, not with a sword in his hand but with a cross on his back. That’s scandalous, as Paul says of the cross, when he writes to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). But Jesus’ story *is* scandalous, from start to finish.

#### 4. Nazareth – as Jesus’ despised home

In our first study on these chapters, we noted that each of the quotations from the Old Testament in chapter 2 mentions the name of a place. In 2:6, it’s *Bethlehem*, the birth place of David. In 2:15, it’s *Egypt*, the place of the exodus. In 2:18, it’s *Ramah*, associated with the exile. Matthew ends chapter 2 by showing how Jesus ends up in Nazareth, and is called a *Nazarene* (2:23).

In fact, however, there is no such reference at all in the Old Testament. What are we to make of this? The answer is probably that Matthew is not referring to a specific text, but to a *theme* found in a number of the prophets. In fact, Matthew himself tells us that it is what the Lord spoke through the prophets (plural, not singular). Matthew himself admits that it is not a specific quotation, and so he might be suggesting that we should be looking for a *theme* – the theme that the Messiah would be despised (Psalm 22:6-8, 13; 69:8, 20-21; Isaiah 11:1; 49:7; 53:2-3, 8; Daniel 9:26). And that fits with Jesus being brought up in Nazareth. Part of the point seems to be to show how Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem, eventually ended up in Nazareth, and that each move was a fulfilment of Scripture.

It’s worth reminding ourselves that Nazareth and Galilee had an unsavoury reputation. Seventy miles north of Jerusalem, Nazareth was a backwater village in the hills, from which Nathaniel suggested that nothing good could come (John 1:46). And Nazareth was in Galilee – which was associated with political revolution and incorrect Jewish observance. It

was as good as foreign territory, sometimes called ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’. The Galileans had a reputation for being uncultured, and for talking with an accent – a northern accent! Galilee was like the *Liverpool* of the first century! When people find out I was born in Liverpool, they immediately assume I’m a car-theiving, football hooligan! There are certain assumptions that go with the territory of being born and brought up in a particular place. Like the old observation that you can tell who the scousers are at a wedding, because they’re the ones with the carnations attached to their shell suits! I wonder, though... can we cope of the thought of Jesus speaking with a northern, maybe even a Liverpoolian, accent?

So, when Jesus of Nazareth and his band of Galilean disciples presented himself to the people of Israel as the fulfilment of their hopes, the reaction was predictable: How can the Messiah come from Galilee? And yet, God chose despised Nazareth to be the home-town of his Son.

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So, there’s a third theme we see woven through these opening chapters of the gospel: Jesus challenges ideas of social status and power. Jesus – born under a cloud of sexual impropriety, taken as a refugee to Egypt, living life as a ridiculed Nazarene, dying as a criminal on a Roman cross, a God-forsaken king of the Jews. How’s that for the mysterious providence of God?

Are we embarrassed and hurt by scandal – our own or someone else’s, sexual or otherwise, real or imagined? Do we feel we have to be embarrassed for God’s sake? Do we think God’s not quite big enough to cope with it? Do we think he can work through it, even use it in his wisdom? What about power? Do we still think power is about being in charge, dishing out orders, expecting people to take us seriously? Do we need to learn again from the one who came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many? As 2008 starts and unfolds, let’s worship this Jesus, to his own glory. Amen.

*Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 30 December 2007.*