

Matthew 1-18-25

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[0 : 00] Do you be seated and again let me give you a really warm welcome. If you're a visitor we're really glad you're with us. Welcome everyone online. If you're here in the building do stay around afterwards we'd love to greet you and give you mulled wine and mince pies and we're going to stay in here there's a bit better ventilation if you can.

I want to speak to you from the reading Matthew chapter 1 verses 18 to 25. It's just on the page opposite of the carol we've just sung so you can follow along. I wonder whether you noticed how carefully it was told.

It's told the birth of Jesus with such delicacy and reserve. As you read it you feel like if you blink you might miss the creator and the king of heaven and earth becoming a human being.

And Matthew as he writes this is completely aware that we've got no measuring stick for this. We've got no way to fit what he's describing into a neat category. We can't escape it.

And so what Matthew does in this passage which is a masterpiece of writing. He does two things. First of all he tells you the story from Joseph's point of view. Because the coming of Jesus, the virgin conception of Jesus was not just irritating and inconvenient for Joseph. It was completely invasive for him.

[1 : 30] And his fears and his pain take up more space than actually the birth of Jesus does. And he shows us firstly how God draws Joseph to be able to cope with this news.

And then the second thing if you look at just verse 22, when I say verses they're just a little number. Verse 22, Matthew kind of breaks into the story and he tells us that you and I are going to have to cope with this as well.

So I've got two points tonight. My first point is this, how does Joseph cope with the birth of Jesus? That's number one. And then number two, how do we cope with the birth of Jesus?

Number one, how does Joseph cope with the reality of this baby? Look at verse 18. Matthew tells us that Mary and Joseph are betrothed. We don't have this today. It's more than being engaged. It's a marriage state.

But it's not yet been consummated. So verse 18 says, can you see it? This is how the birth of Jesus, the genesis of Jesus, came about.

[2 : 39] His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. But before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. And with that little phrase, we are thrown into the depths of Joseph's pain.

There's been no sexual contact between them. But suddenly he discovers that the woman he loves, the woman that he's intending to marry and spend the rest of his life with, is pregnant.

And you don't need to have a good imagination to think of his pain. I mean, she's obviously not the person that I thought she was. She's been with another man and she said nothing.

I'm going to be publicly humiliated. I don't understand how she could possibly do this. And so verse 19, because Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man, and did not want to expose Mary publicly to disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

You can sense the struggle in that verse. This is beyond him morally. But to say that he is a just man means that he's a law abider.

[3 : 51] And that would mean, in this context, to divorce Mary and expose her to public shame. But we're told a second thing about him, aren't we?

That it's not only that he is righteous, but that he's kind. He still loves Mary. Despite what he sees as a clear betrayal.

And he decides, I don't want to hurt her, and I don't want to wound her. And then God steps in, in verse 20. But after he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home with your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Now our dreams, my dreams, mostly have to do with my anxieties, or with whatever I've eaten before I've gone to bed the night before. But this is not an ordinary dream. It's an Old Testament way of God revealing to his people what he means and what he's doing.

And now it's the angel of the Lord who gets straight to it. And notice the order. Look at verse 20. The angel of the Lord says, first of all, just see with me. Don't be afraid to marry her. And then second, the child is God in skin.

[5 : 05] It's almost as if the most astonishing fact in all of history, that the creator and the king of the universe, becoming a human being, that's the solution for one man's terribly troubling question.

In just a couple of words, God opens the deepest and the most unfathomable mystery to Joseph. And he says, that's the resolution to your problem. Enabling him to deal with the reality of the birth of Jesus.

He has to make the child his own. Now why? Why does Matthew tell us the story this way from Joseph's point of view?

And I think it's to show you and I that the essence of Christianity is that it's about salvation. And it's to show us the powerlessness of human morality.

Because Christianity is a religion where God saves us. We don't save ourselves. And there's nothing in Christianity that makes sense apart from that. And Matthew makes that point in two ways.

[6 : 11] First of all, he highlights, doesn't he, in verse 19, he says, Joseph is a great guy. He's got great moral qualities. He's just. He's devout. He's kind. But all the justice and all the kindness of the world cannot prepare him for the coming of God in the flesh.

The creator of the universe entering into the womb of the Virgin Mary. In the form of a vulnerable, dependent child. And so tonight, we need to recognize that all our morality cannot reach God.

You just can't comprehend something so remarkable and so unique. It requires God to step in and speak. And the second way Matthew makes this point is that the angel tells Mary that the baby, when the baby comes, give him this name.

He's got a name already. And the name, verse 21, can you just look there with me? You ought to give him the name Jesus. And his name is all about salvation. It's all about rescue.

You shall bear a son. You don't need to go to the ultrasound to find that out. You shall give him the name Jesus. For he will save his people from their sins. The child in the womb that comes from the Holy Spirit is a boy.

[7 : 31] And the boy's name is Jesus. And you will call him that, God says. He's emphatic. He and no one else. Can you see at the end of verse 21? We'll save his people from their sins.

So for all our moral goodness, and there's a lot of it around, our situation is so dire that you and I need saving. We need rescuing. And we need rescuing so much that God has to enter into human experience.

And the evil that he has come to rescue us from is the evil within us. But the saving that Jesus has come to do, can you just look at verse 21 again? It's not for everyone.

He's come to save his people. Only those who will recognize their lostness, only those who will come to him and receive him as their God, only those who've come to him for saving can say that they are his people.

And it's at this point that you might be thinking, and people often say to me, that makes Christianity so narrow and so exclusive. I mean, you are saying that if this is God in the flesh, then it demands that we worship Jesus.

[8 : 39] We see him as the only way to God. And we bow to him and we serve him as our God. And I want to say to you tonight that it's not narrow and exclusive.

It's just a different diagnosis. Every other great world religion says that what's really important, according to our teachers, is that you follow our teachings.

That you live a life that's morally and ethically excellent, according to our teachers. And if you do that, if you live your life well enough, you will reach enlightenment. You will reach God.

You will reach Nirvana. But Christianity comes along with a completely different diagnosis. It's a different verdict on what is wrong. Christianity says to you and I, your situation is so dire that you need rescuing.

And that all my morality and all my goodness cannot get me to God. And that the Son of God had to leave heaven to become one of us and live for us and die for us to save us from our sin.

[9 : 46] And fellowship and friendship with God comes only as we put our faith in him and not in our own goodness. And that's not narrow and exclusive. It's just a different diagnosis.

I've got a friend in America who had a daughter, and the daughter had suffered for years with a recurring sickness. She'd gone to a list of doctors at enormous cost, and the doctors had treated her for asthma.

Asthma-like symptoms. Asthma-like symptoms. But it was an asthma. And during, and this time, they were having some work done on their house, on their drain pipes. And the contractor came to them and said, I've got some bad news.

There is black mold in the bedroom wall of your daughter. Okay, so when the contractor comes and gives his verdict to my friends, do they say to him, that is terribly narrow and exclusive?

No, they don't, do they? It's a different diagnosis. It's a really inconvenient diagnosis. They'd move out of the house for a year. They had a very expensive renovation, and their daughter recovered very quickly.

[10 : 58] Finally, the angel's words to Joseph tell us that all our justice and all our goodness are not enough. We need a radical solution.

You don't need more rules and practices. You don't need to be told, be kind, be better. You need the Son of God to come for you, and to die for you, and to give him your allegiance, and worship. And so we read in verse 24, when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and he took Mary home as his wife. That is how he comes to terms with the reality of who Jesus is.

He hears God's word, and he obeys. And just in case we thought, well, this is more about Joseph than about us, here's my second point. How do we cope with the birth of Jesus? Before he even finishes the Joseph story, verse 22, Matthew interrupts, doesn't he, his own narrative, because he wants you and I to see that this has got a universal significance.

Look at verse 22. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will be with child, and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

[12 : 19] All of this took place, this vast and astonishing miracle. The angel of the Lord's coming, the entry of the Son of God into humanity.

This is the actual presence of God with us. That's what Emmanuel means. It's in contrast to all the signs and the symbols and the shadows of his presence in the Old Testament.

And how glad we are, because in the Old Testament, when God appeared, his appearance was terrifying. So there was a consuming fire, there was a pillar of smoke, but God here takes all his majesty, and all his glory, and all his power, and he places it in human form in a little baby.

So that he might be God with us. To enter into a personal and loving intimacy with us. He enters our flesh to become flesh of our flesh.

And so some people I know, they mock Christianity. And they mock Christians who talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus. We've got a personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior.

[13 : 30] Sometimes Christians do speak of that experience as if it's the one thing that marks them out for everyone else, puts them above other people. But it is true, isn't it, that you can experience God and not really know him personally.

It's possible to have a general sense of God in the mountains, or a sunset, or the ocean, but it's a different thing to meet him personally, to know him. And Emmanuel means that through this one, Jesus, you can meet God and know him personally.

That he can come into your life in all his glory. And he's coming to this world not in such a way to crush you or destroy you, but to give you life and salvation.

And there's nothing in Christianity that makes sense apart from this. It's only this that makes sense of Jesus' claim when he claims to know all that God knows and to do all that God does and to reveal the Father perfectly.

because all the fullness of God dwelt in him bodily. It explains why Jesus unerringly welcomes and receives people when they come to worship him.

[14:47] Do you know in the Bible when angels turn up, humans often bow down and worship them. And the angels say, get up, don't worship me. I'm a created being. Worship God alone.

But when Thomas gets on his hands and knees and says to Jesus, my Lord and my God, Jesus receives it. And the first people who believed in Jesus and followed Jesus are the last people in this world you would expect.

They were first century Jews. In the Greek world, sometimes Greeks dressed up in human form, normally with some kind of motive. But those who read and believed the Old Testament, they believed that God was the creator, that he was infinitely greater, that he was transcendent above creation.

To even imagine that a human could be God in the flesh was blasphemous. Nonsense. It was a contradiction. But it was fundamental to the faith of the early Christians and their worship.

They worshipped Jesus as Lord and God. Only in him. Because he alone gives forgiveness and repentance. And the fact that Jesus is called Emmanuel means that he didn't leave his Godness in heaven, but he willingly accepts all the poverty of human spirit.

[16:08] He's vulnerable to suffering, to hunger, to weakness, to death. It's not that God somehow becomes a human and is not affected by it. It's not that he clothes himself for a little time with a human body.

No, he enters fully into human life. He takes a human body and a human soul and he enters completely to the physical and emotional life. His manhood is complete and his manhood is permanent.

So when he lived, he lived as God a man. And when he died, he died as God a man. And when he rose, he rose as God a man. And now tonight, he rules as God a man.

And this he did so that he could be with us. And we could be with him. Because that is what salvation means. That is the miracle we sing about.

That is why Matthew tells us his name is Emmanuel right in the middle of this Joseph story. It's really not about being good and it's not about being bad. It's about whether you and I are with Christ or he with us.

[17:16] we come to him and we say, thank you, Lord. I want to be with you and I want you to be with me. And we receive it with open arms. That is the fundamental posture.

And I think if this is true, we can't be apathetic about it. You can't put Jesus on your list of favorites or bookmark him for later. You can't be impartial or neutral.

You can give yourself to him without reserve or you can run away and kill him for blasphemy as happened. And that is where the carols that you've sung tonight are so very, very helpful.

Oh come, let us adore him. That's the authentic response to Christmas. to pray to him tonight that he might be Emmanuel to you.

I'd love you to do that. It may be that tonight you think, this is from another world. This is new. I've not heard anything like this before.

[18:28] And you want to know more. We would love to invite you. We're going to do a course on Zoom. We're going to do three nights on Zoom. We're going to look at the life and the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Each session will be about an hour and quarter. It'll be on Zoom. You can put a fake name into the account if you want. Somebody asked me this morning whether you can turn off your camera. You can turn off your camera.

You can do that. But surely, if what I've said tonight is true, or even possibly true, it's certainly worth looking into, isn't it?

We would love you to join us. It'll be three evenings. You don't need to make a commitment. Just talk to the person who invited you to come tonight. Bring them along. It'll be three Tuesday evenings in January for an hour and a quarter.

But if Jesus really is the Son of God, Emmanuel, God with us, don't let another Christmas pass without thinking on it, praying about it.

[19:33] reading about it. We're going to sing.