

Friday, 24 November 2023

Matthew 1:18-25

The Birth of Jesus

What are your favourite Christmas traditions?

For some, it may be all about the family time together, for others a bit of peace and quiet. Maybe it's all about the Christmas dinner or watching a specific Christmas film.

Well, I came across an article on unique Christmas traditions from around the globe and I thought I'd share a few with you.

In Japan, a traditional Christmas meal is now found in having a KFC. In Norway, the most unorthodox tradition is to hide your brooms on Christmas Eve as it is believed witches would come and steal them. In Venezuela, residents go to church on Christmas Eve, not uncommon, but on rollerblades. And in Sweden, in 1966 a 13-metre-tall Yule Goat was built to celebrate Advent. This tradition led to another tradition in which people try to burn down the goat.

There are lots of strange traditions as well as lots of wonderful moments at Christmas.

But what is the Heart of Christmas? I'm sure many of us will have heard many phrases like what's the reason for the season or keeping Christ in Christmas.

There's nothing wrong with all the traditions and festiveness but from a Christian perspective, we should use Christmas to remember God entering the world—the Incarnation. The word incarnation means God being embodied or taking on human form.

One boy came up to me at the end of an assembly I was doing here at the school in the week and asked me, Was Jesus born on the 24th of December? Well, I said to him, he wasn't necessarily born on the 24th or 25th of December but it's a time when we can remember him, much like the late Queen's two birthdays. One is her actual day of birth and the other is a national day to celebrate.

Christmas gives us a chance to remember God's choice to bring his most precious gift to earth, to offer us a chance to have a united relationship with him, through Jesus.

The book of Matthew tends to focus more on Joseph's interaction with the narrative of Jesus being born in comparison to Luke's account which focuses more on the perspective of Mary. It's a blessing to be able to read both and build up this picture of how the birth of Christ came to be.

If you have your bibles do keep them open in Matthew 1:18-25 as we look into our passage.

'Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph.' In Jewish custom, this looks very different to what we may know in the West as an engagement. A man and woman had a binding agreement to be married, between their families and this could last up to a year before they were officially married and consummated that marriage. They were considered married at this time but not in the fullest sense, which would have been sealed by a ceremony of some sort. This is why Joseph would have had to divorce Mary, even though they weren't fully married.

Verse 19 just highlights something of Joseph's character. He is a Godly man. As many would have assumed and as many today may say, Joseph thought Mary must have been unfaithful. But Joseph doesn't react by making a big scene. Instead, he chooses to honour Mary and divorce her quietly.

God intervenes at this point through an angel in a dream. The dream shows Joseph the reality of the situation, bringing him guidance, comfort and hope.

It was wonderful this morning to see the children act out the Nativity story, wasn't it? And in that, we see Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, the wise men. In that we see the whole story coming together. Our focus in our passage today is Joseph and there are three points that point us to the heart of the Christmas story.

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In verse 20 we see 'the importance of Jesus being born.' The reason for Christmas is so that we remember that Jesus was born through the work of the Holy Spirit forming God in human flesh in Mary's womb. Without this truth, we can't be assured of the rest of Jesus' work on earth. Jesus was fully human and fully God. That is why both human biological pregnancy and the Holy Spirit's work are vital for Jesus entering the world. God dwelling in human flesh.

Me and Bekah have been watching the recently released episodes of The Crown. And when we think about a Queen or King, what comes to your mind? The grand life of yachts and fine dining. Castles and palaces. It's quite a contrast from God's way of entering the world. God chose to enter the world in the form of a baby for an important reason. Simply to show humility. From the very start of Jesus' life, we learn that if we want to know God we must be humble.

God reverses the normal order of the world. When there is trouble in the world who are the ones that suffer most? The poor, the marginalised, and those who can't fall back on money, or contacts or power or fame. God cares for those most in need. God could have entered this world as a human in the finest palace. With the huge powerful army. But instead, he enters as a baby, because he is showing a pattern. A pattern that means you can't buy your way into heaven, you can't do enough good things to get brownie points to be first on the list to have a relationship with God.

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We come to our second point which is shown to us in verse 21. It says “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.” The second part of that verse highlights our second point. God had a purpose for sending his son into the world so what is ‘The Purpose of Jesus being born’?

Purpose is a big thing in life. It guides our decisions. For many people, a lack of purpose leaves them feeling empty and unsure.

Well, right from the very start, verse 21 highlights Jesus’ mission, and his purpose for his life’s work. ‘He will save his people from their sins’.

Our passage today is the starting moment that sets up the most incredible story in history because this story is based on truth and has the power to change your life.

I enjoy watching war films, 1917, the Band of Brothers series, Hacksaw Ridge and I'm sure many others. And one of the reasons I find these films so good to watch is because they are based on true stories. Well the passage we have just read, is so amazing because it is the truth of how God came to provide a way for our lives to be transformed.

God’s rescue plan starts with a baby in the manger and ends with an empty tomb.

The purpose of Jesus being born is this. All humanity has a broken relationship with God. Because of the things we have done wrong and our selfishness. That wrongdoing is called Sin. God is perfect and we are covered in sin. Much like a white t-shirt that has been covered in mud. God can’t have sin in heaven. But God wants us to be in a relationship with him. He had a plan to offer restoration to all humanity. But God can’t just write sin off. That's not just. We wouldn’t just want a murderer to be let off and roam free. No, something must be exchanged, a great debt must be paid for all the wrong humanity has done, and the t-shirt must be cleaned. But whatever or whoever is used to pay the debt of sin, to clean the t-shirt, had to be perfect. So God gave up his son Jesus, to enter this world, to be mocked and abused and to die in humiliation. To take upon himself the debt formed by sin in our

place. And then rise from the dead, paying off that sin. He will give us a brand new pristine t-shirt if we just believe in him and recognise Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

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Lord and Saviour are two names that are given to Jesus and in Cruden's Concordance, there are 198 names or titles that are ascribed to Jesus in one form or another. Jesus' names help us see our third point 'The result of Jesus being born'.

We see two names given at this point in our passage. Verse 21 to 23 says 'She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

Jesus and Immanuel. Both are precious. They are precious because they highlight the fact that God has forged a way of salvation for humans. Whilst also showing that he isn't a distant God that leaves us to work out a route to salvation, no he is involved with life.

Of all the names that are given to Jesus the two we see in our passage today show us much of what we need to know about God.

The name Jesus comes from the Hebrew name Joshua which means Yahweh saves. Yahweh is the Hebraic name for God. So the result of Jesus being born is that, as his name says, God will save. This is what we were talking about just a moment ago with the angel declaration in Joseph's dream in verse 21.

The promised result of Jesus coming into the world is that there is now a way to be made right in the eyes of God. There is a chance to have a relationship with him.

As well as the name Jesus we also come across a second name. Verse 23 "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

This verse is quoted from Isaiah 7:14. Isaiah was a prophet, meaning a messenger from God. He is talking to the King of Judah at the time, who is fearful that other nations will attack him. And his biggest fear is that the line of King David will be broken. If you can join us next week Roy will be looking at the Genealogy that we see before our passage today. And there is some importance in the line of David being where Jesus descends from.

But what we need to know is Isaiah gives a message to King Ahaz, promising that no matter what happens. God will be faithful and bring the promised King through the line of David.

And the amazing thing is that this was said 700 years before Jesus' birth.

I shared this image with our home group a few months ago, and some of you may have seen it before, but it's a graph that shows 63,779 cross-references between different verses in the bible. From a human point of view, the bible was written by 40 authors, over 1500 years, in multiple languages. The Bible is complex, diverse and intricate. It's by human authors but is inspired and held together by God. It's impossible that it couldn't have been.

God draws all of history together holding a 700-year-old promise in the palm of his hand and bringing it to fulfilment by his will at exactly the right time.

The name Immanuel is told 700 years before Jesus' Birth. What does it mean? God with us. Well, that name is pointing out two things for us.

Firstly, God with us is a reference to the fact that Jesus is God and he came to earth as a human. The name Immanuel expresses the miracle that Jesus has been born into this world both fully God and fully man.

Throughout the whole Bible, God is with his people. Sometimes in visible ways, sometimes not. But never was God so clearly present with His people as He was through being born as a baby into the world.

But the name Immanuel doesn't just refer to the fact that God is with us in the sense of the human Jesus who was born, walked, lived and died 2000 years ago, but it speaks truth into the fact that Jesus isn't dead, he is alive.

God is with us, now. As we live and breathe, if you believe in God, his holy spirit lives in you. You are alive in Jesus.

Galatians 2:20 says 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'

The reality of Jesus being born is that God is with us. He walked on this earth, lived a perfect life, died on the cross, and took the punishment for our sins, so he could complete the mission to save his people. But God doesn't just stop there. He doesn't do the saving work and then just abandon his people. No, he lives with us, walks with us, guides us, and protects us in all of life's moments.

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So what is the heart of Christmas?

Well, it's seen in the importance, the purpose and the reality of Jesus being born.

God is beyond comprehension for us to understand. So by his blessing and through his word we can see different aspects of his character and being. So it's right at

different times of the year to think about certain aspects of God. Many of us will wear a poppy and have a moment of silence on Remembrance Sunday each year. A reminder of the sacrifice of many for our freedom. Well, Christmas is important as it acts as a reminder for all those who know Jesus, that God came to earth. So at some point this Christmas it's good to just spend a moment reflecting on God stepping down into the world, as a baby, rejoice over that fact.

And as we think through that act of God entering the world. Hopefully, we can remember or maybe reflect on for the first time, what was said in verse 23 'he has come to save his people from their sins'. Jesus came to the world to complete a mission. To save people from their sins. We have all sinned, which has separated us from a relationship with God. Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection mean that we can have a relationship with God once again. Do you know Jesus personally?

The wonderful truth of Jesus coming to earth is found in the name he has been given—Immanuel - God with Us. He walked this earth, he knows our pains, our struggles, our temptations. He knows the joys of life, he knows what friendship is, what it means to be in a family together. He knows what a true relationship is. That is why he isn't dead or distant. He is God with us. If you ever feel lonely or down. Like no one gets you like you've been overlooked or forgotten. There is a truth that the name of Jesus brings. God is with us. Immanuel.

God's rescue plan is called the Good News. It starts with a baby in the manger and ends with an empty tomb.