

**‘AND YOU ARE TO GIVE HIM THE NAME . . . ’
MATTHEW 1:18-25**

[CHRISTMAS @ ST MARK’S 2020]

1. Stories & Names.

In the Shakespeare play *Romeo & Juliet*, Juliet famously says at one point: ‘What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.’ Her point is that people are still the same people whatever they’re called, just like the thing we call a rose looks and smells the same no matter if you call it something different. In the context of the play, of course, she’s bemoaning the fact that the names Capulet and Montague are what keep her and Romeo apart. The Capulet and the Montague families are sworn enemies. But a Capulet and a Montague have now fallen in love. And they deeply resent the fact that their names make their love unacceptable to their families.

What’s in a name? The irony of Juliet’s speech of course is that she wants the answer to be ‘nothing’. “There’s nothing in a name. Names are meaningless. There’s just me and this man I love and that should be all that matters.” But, of course, the actual answer to her question is ‘everything’. Names aren’t meaningless. They matter to people. And that’s why Capulet and Montague are still surnames that many people know today. Because they’re the names that go with Romeo and Juliet’s tragedy. We remember those names because we remember that story.

Perhaps less dramatically, our names have stories too. My middle name is Robert because I’m named after my father. My wife’s first name is Tamara because her Mum was reading a Russian spy novel when she was pregnant with her and that was the name of one of the characters in the story. You see, names often come with stories. And stories are often full of important names- names which carry some of the story with them.

And the Christmas story is no different. And tonight/today I want to briefly reflect with you on the passage we just read from the end of Matthew 1. And I want to talk about both the story it tells and the names which help us to understand the story’s significance.

2. The Story of Jesus.

So firstly, the story of Jesus. Of course, the story of Jesus is long and gripping and takes many twists and turns. So gospel’s like Matthew’s are worth reading in full. But this is where it starts. In chapter 1. Prior to this, Matthew painted a picture for us of the history of Jesus’ family. But now he begins to tell us about Jesus’ birth. Verse 18: ‘This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about.’ And what follows are some very surprising events, but also what I’m describing as some surprising explanations.

- surprising events

There are quite a few surprising events in the section we read I think. There was God communicating to Joseph in a dream. There was an angel appearing to him as well. And

arguably, for people in our day, one of the more surprising things here is what verse 25 tells us- that Joseph and Mary did not consummate their marriage for a very long time!

But of course, the most surprising thing here is that Mary conceived without that consummation. She became pregnant even though she was a virgin. And on the basis of passages like this one, this is what Christians have believed for 2000 years. Even the historic creeds capture this claim: Jesus 'was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary'.

A few weeks ago one of my friends recorded on Facebook an interaction with her two sons from that morning. It went like this:

'Driving to school this morning.

Son # 1: Mummy, what is life?

Mum: Sorry?

Son # 1: What is life?

Mum: What do you mean, what is life?

Son # 2: He means where does life come from? Like people.

Son # 1: Yeah. Like how do people become alive?

And Mum comments: The car trip to school takes about 3 minutes. I really think they overestimate my ability to explain big topics in an age-appropriate way in short spaces of time.'

I enjoyed reading that. But I'm not really sure how the car ride to school ended. I don't know how she answered that big question. But whatever she said I'm pretty sure her answer didn't include anything about virginal conception. Because that's not where people normally come from. That's not how babies are usually made. But on this occasion, once in history, this is how a baby was made. Born to a virgin. Conceived by the Holy Spirit. Planted in her womb not by a man, but by God.

Now I'm aware, of course, that many people around the world today just can't accept that this sort of thing is possible. And of course Christians aren't claiming it's normal. Exactly the opposite. But when you know the God who creates the universe and who can raise the dead to life, some of your assumptions about what's possible start to change.

As to why he did it this way, I don't claim to know. But I would say that it seems somehow fitting that a child who would himself be both God and man, would be born through both the work of God's Spirit and a human womb¹.

But whatever God's reasons may have been, I'm sure you'll agree that these were surprising events to say the least.

But they're also accompanied by surprising explanations.

- surprising explanations

¹ I owe this observation to Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (BST Commentary Series), p.64.

Firstly there are the words of the angel in verse 20. He assures Joseph that he need not fear marrying Mary as there's actually no disgrace in her pregnancy². What's more, the angel tells him the name he has to give their baby because he will save people from sins! Astounding.

Then there's also the explanation provided by Matthew the gospel writer in verses 22-23. He points out that what was happening here was in fulfilment of God's ancient promises. And he quotes from the prophet Isaiah who spoke God's words back in the 8th century BC. The promise of God 800 years earlier was that one day a virgin would give birth to a son- a son who would actually bring the presence of God to the earth. And that too is astounding.

And what we're left to ponder here is that God is not just doing surprising things because he wants to show off his unique power. He's also eager to make sure people understand what he's doing. The God who speaks through the ancient prophets and who reveals his purposes through dreams and angels is a God who's desperate to communicate.

3. The Names of Jesus.

And that leads me to my second point. Because above all, what God is desperate to communicate is who Jesus is and what he's come to do. And that's why the names given to Jesus here are such an important part of the story. It's true to say that in many respects these names carry the story with them. And there are three in this passage I want to point out.

- Messiah

The first is there in verse 18. 'This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about'. Messiah. I'm sure that's a word you've heard before. But what does it mean? Well, the Messiah was the name the Israelites gave to the king God had promised to send them. For hundreds of years faithful Jews had been waiting for God to send a ruler who would bring true justice and true peace. God had made many promises to his people along these lines. And when Matthew calls Jesus the Messiah here, he's saying: 'he's the one'. He's finally come. God's king for God's people- the descendant of King David who will rule forever³. Matthew's telling us here that we're dealing with someone we just can't ignore. He may be a baby now but one day he's going to rule the whole world. Jesus is the Messiah.

- Jesus

But second there's the name Jesus itself. And here I'm thinking of verse 21 where the angel says this to Joseph: '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.' You see, Jesus is the Greek equivalent of the Jewish name Joshua. And Joshua means 'the LORD saves'. The name

² My own view is that an alternate translation of the last line of verse 20 is both possible and theologically sensible: 'for the one having been conceived in her from the Spirit, is holy.' This reading suggests the word 'holy' describes Jesus himself, rather than the Spirit.

³ Note that verses 20 hints at this as well when it refers to Joseph as the 'son of David'.

Jesus was given to Joseph and Mary's child because saving people was his destiny, his purpose. Ultimately he came to save people from all suffering and sorrow- a hope many of us have clung on to very tightly this year. That day is still to come. But chiefly he came to save people from their sins. And that's true for every Christian even now.

Of course, we need saving from our sins not only because our sins harm us and others here and now. But also because sin stirs God to anger. When we reject God and his way for us, it arouses his jealous love and leads to punishment. And every one of us needs saving from that. Of course, a day would come in Jesus' life when he would bear God's punishment for sin on a cross in place of other sinners. That's how Jesus would one day be a Saviour. But at this point in Matthew's gospel, here in chapter 1, it's enough to know that he is one. Jesus. A Saviour from God.

And by allowing us to hear these words the angel spoke to Joseph, Matthew reminds us that Christianity is not good advice for moral living. It's a rescue mission.

- Immanuel

But it's a rescue mission that God has refused to delegate. And that's why the third name we see here is crucial for us to understand as well. And it comes in verse 23 where Matthew quotes from the prophet Isaiah: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means "God with us")'.

When I said before that the ancient prophets and the dream and the angel Joseph saw all point to a God who is desperate to communicate with us, I left this out. But nothing speaks to God's desire to communicate with people more than this. That he himself would show up. That he would come to us in the person of Jesus to make himself known.

And this really is what Matthew's gospel is claiming at this point. That Jesus was God himself in the flesh. In the birth of Jesus, God came to his own world. He entered his creation. He came to show us who he really is. And he came to save his people from their sins⁴. The name 'Immanuel' is not a prayer. It's a statement of fact. This name is not just a wishful thought that the invisible God might be around us and alongside us. No- this name testifies to the fact that at a moment in history the invisible God was made visible. He was held as a baby by his mother Mary and his father Joseph. And in the years that followed people would see his face, and hear his words, and feel his touch. And the wisest among them would know that they had seen the face of God, they had heard the words of God, and they had felt the touch of God.

Yes. This really is what the Bible claims about Christmas. That that creased and crying newborn in the dirty manger in the dank stable was God.

4. His Name, Our Story.

It's been a tough year hasn't it. For some of us this will be a tough Christmas too, for all sorts of reasons. It's a year where we might feel like we've missed out on all sorts of

⁴ See also Psalm 130:8.

things, and where we're behind the eight ball when it comes to celebrating the milestones that've passed. And you may have already seen it but I want to play you a video of the ad Myer produced for Christmas this year. I think it captures the cultural mood well. Take a look.

[Play Video]

It's a fun and clever ad I think. We did all miss so much along the way this year didn't we? But can we really pack it all into one day? That just sounds exhausting to me. Should we make tomorrow/today bigger than Christmas, at least this year?

Well my message for you tonight/this morning is that you can't. It's not possible to make Christmas bigger than Christmas. Because it doesn't get any bigger than Christmas. There's no bigger story than the story of Jesus' birth, and there's no greater joy for those that understand it.

That baby is the Messiah, the Saviour, God himself come to us. And those names, his names, tell us his story. But not only his story. His name can also be our story.

Because we need him. Every one of us. And not just this year. But every year. And forever. We need a king to rule over us and to bring perfect justice and peace- we need the Messiah. We need a Saviour to rescue us from our sins- Jesus. And we need God- we need God to be with us- Immanuel. And if we will receive Jesus, he will. God will be with us. He will save us. And he will rule us and protect us and provide what we really need.

And once again this year Christmas invites everyone one us to do just that- to receive Jesus. To welcome him. To make his name our story. To do in our lives what the angel asked Joseph to do in his- to give that baby the name God had for him. Will you do that? Will you give the Christmas child the name Jesus because he will save you from your sins? Will you call him Messiah because he's your king? And will you call him Immanuel because you know that then and now, through Jesus, God himself is with you? I hope you will.

'This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about . . . '

'you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins'

'and they will call him Immanuel (which means 'God with us').