

JESUS AS THE WORD OF GOD

John 1: 1-18

From the very beginning, John's gospel makes it clear that the gospel is not intended to be a simple narration of Jesus' life but, rather, a reflection of the absolute importance of Jesus for life eternal. The opening poem (vs 1-18) already anticipates a number of central themes within the gospel as a whole: the relationship of Jesus with God; the sharp division between those who believe and those who do not (light and darkness); the revelation of glory that was the life of Jesus; the importance of the incarnation (God becoming human) as an event in history; the rejection of Jesus that is the indication of the darkness that has enveloped humanity; and the special role that testimony and evidence play in persuading the reader to believe in Jesus.

The meaning of the poem is clear: Jesus Christ is not just a prophet or a saviour, but the very incarnation of the Word of God, the active power of God involved in creating the world and bringing life into it.

The flow of the poem begins with the Word, the Word which is a person, a person who is life and light come to a world of darkness and death. The Word incarnate comes into a world, but a world that will reject him. Nonetheless, there will be those few who will be open to the light and as a result will be born again by God. This Word made flesh is identified with Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, Jesus has the supreme role of being the revelation of God ('No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.' V.18)

THE BIRTH OF JESUS IN THE GOSPELS

Only Matthew and Luke offer stories of the birth of Jesus. Mark's gospel begins with his baptism by John as an adult, and John's gospel begins with Jesus as the Word of God with God from before the creation of the world.

Matthew's and Luke's accounts are complementary but different. That they would be different on details is understandable. They are re-telling events that would have taken place 40-50 years earlier. The details, however, do matter. They are interpreted as part of the divine plan for Jesus. They reveal Jesus' identity in relation to God and his mission as the future messiah.

Matthew 1-2

1: 1-17 – Jesus' Genealogy

Genealogies have a purpose, and especially when they come at the beginning of a story. Jesus' pedigree is important. It's about his identity and qualifications as messiah. Right at the outset we are told that Jesus is the messiah, promised of old. His lineage goes back to Abraham, who first received the promise that he would be a father of a

nation, Israel, and through Israel would bring blessing and salvation to all people. Jesus, the messiah, is taking the role of Israel.

Second, Jesus' lineage passes through the line of king David. Prophecies about the messiah were a bit all over the place. But they had in common the belief that there would be descent from David the greatest king Israel ever had. The messiah would be king, and a king descended from David, destined to bring all God's plans to fulfillment for Israel and the world.

The world beyond Israel is also represented in Jesus' lineage. In particular, Ruth and Rahab are listed. Both are non-Jews and both use their womanly charms to fulfill their purposes. God works in mysterious ways.

And God's plans are also fulfilled even through the moral flaws of people. A good example is the mention of Tamar who bore the child of Judah who was her father-in-law.

Finally, the number of names are important. There are 6 groups of 7 names, 7 being the most powerful symbolic number of God's activity. Jesus is the 7th 7. There is destiny marked all over him.

GENEALOGIES: Matthew 1: 1-17 compared to Luke 3: 23-38

In Matthew the key purpose of including a genealogy of Jesus is to link him to king David, as this is part of the prophecy about the messiah, namely, that he will emerge out of the lineage of David. Also, the link to Abraham is important, as he is the father of the Jewish people to whom the great promises of God were given, namely, that through Israel the world would be saved. Also, in the lineage are some less-than-desirable characters morally and racially (e.g. Rahab the prostitute, Ruth the Moabite, etc). Moreover, they are women rather than men, which would imply lesser authority. This gives us a further sense that God's actions not predictable or conformable to typical human and patriarchal behaviours. God also uses the most unlikely people, and this reminds us that God sees possibilities we do not see in people. In Luke, the David connection is there, but the other key link is Adam who is the father of all humankind. Hence, in Luke's gospel there is a concern to focus on Jesus' openness to non-Jews and the universal goal of the gospel for all peoples. But we'll get to Luke in our next session.

1: 18-25 – The Birth of Jesus

This account of Jesus' birth is presented to us from the point of view of Joseph (in Luke it is from Mary's). But in both Joseph and Mary there is a similar response to the angel's message. There is fear and perplexity, but there is also receptivity and trust. Without it, there would be no family for Jesus to grow up in. The trouble they must have gone through in that time and place cannot be underestimated. Both in the gospels as well as records outside the gospels, there are allusions to accusations of Jesus being illegitimate. This does not dissuade Joseph from choosing to marry Mary and become a father to Jesus. The names Jesus is given are also important pointers to his purpose and destiny. "Jesus" because he will be a saviour to his people and the world. "Emmanuel" because God's way of saving is by coming close and sharing the human journey in all

its possibilities and tribulations. The unusual birth (from a virgin) also fulfills prophecy, another pointer to Jesus' divine destiny.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS: Matthew 1: 18-25 compared to Luke 1: 26-38

Matthew tells the story from Joseph's perspective and Luke tells it from Mary's perspective. Luke generally tends to focus on the importance of women in the ministry of Jesus.

In Matthew, Joseph and Mary are already living in Bethlehem, and the birth is in a house. Once Herod is hunting the infant, Joseph takes his family to Egypt until Herod dies. Since Herod's son takes over his father's throne in Judea (where Bethlehem is), Joseph doesn't return there, but goes north and settles in the village of Nazareth in Galilee.

In Luke, Mary and Joseph are already in Nazareth and only travel to Bethlehem because that is where Joseph was born and that is where they must go to be registered for tax purposes. Once they arrive, they realize there is not enough room in the inns, so they take up space in the stable of one inn. After the birth they stay in Bethlehem 8 days, until Jesus is ceremoniously circumcised in the temple (Bethlehem is just outside Jerusalem). There they also encounter Simeon and Anna, who give remarkable testimony about Jesus. Then they return home to Nazareth.

Even though the details vary, the key elements that are central are:

- 1) Bethlehem is important for the birth, since Old Testament prophecy claims Bethlehem as the birthplace of the messiah.
- 2) Jesus grew up in Nazareth, so he must end up there somehow. The birth in Bethlehem and the family settling in Nazareth are the key elements.
- 3) But also, a key element is the miraculous nature of the birth and all the remarkable events that attend it, giving witness to the special nature of this child possessing a unique mission of God for the world.

Matthew 2: 1-12 – The Magi visit Jesus

Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction with each other 3 times in 7 BC. Since Jupiter was the "royal" or kingly planet and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews, the conclusion was obvious: a new king of the Jews was about to be born. This may account for the journey of astrologers/astronomers from the east. Clearly, they were wealthy to be able to make the Journey. Clearly, they represented some royalty from where they came, explaining the welcome they receive from Herod as well as the concern. There are many messages in this remarkable story, but the most important one is this: Herod is not the true king, but Jesus is. Herod is a false king, and this will be shown again and again through his actions as well as those of his children who succeed him. Jesus is the true king. The gifts the Magi offer him are the kinds of gifts one would give to a king.

There are all kinds of allusions to the story of Moses' birth through the wise men. Astrology was big business in Egypt and popular tradition believed that Pharaoh's astrologers predicted the birth of Moses as the source of Pharaoh's downfall.

Even more significantly, the wise men from the east receive God's light through their own religious persuasion, while the religious leaders of Israel, who have the law and the prophets, cannot and will not accept Jesus as God's messiah. The Jewish king (Herod) wants to kill him as a threat to his power, whereas these wise men (who had royal blood) travel a great distance to worship the baby Jesus as king.

The gifts are significant – Gold represents royalty (Jesus is king/Lord), Frankincense represents repentance (Israel will be called to return to God according to Jesus leadership), and Myrrh represents mourning (Jesus will be rejected and killed, and this will spell dire consequences for Israel as a whole).

Matthew 2: 13-23 – Travels to Egypt

Jesus is such a threat, that the most powerful man in the Jewish world, Herod, kills a whole village full of other babies to get rid of him. The shadow of the cross falls over Jesus early on. But Herod's actions also reveal who Jesus truly is. Jesus' travels to Egypt are not just practical (to get away from Herod). They point to the story of Israel's slavery and liberation "out of Egypt." Herod is the new Pharaoh as Jesus is the new Moses. To understand Jesus' role is also to look to Moses who leads the people out of slavery and brings them the law of God. But Jesus will also be greater than Moses. The Jewish people may have been liberated, given the law, and the land. But once they were exiled, they never got their freedom back. And even though there were pockets of time where they inhabited and controlled their land, they were constantly invaded, overrun and ruled by foreigners. The Romans were the last of a long line of foreign invaders and rulers. Clearly, there were popular expectations of liberation that any would be Messiah would have to fulfill. Clearly, Jesus' mission as Messiah would have to address the theme of liberation and salvation from slavery.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus return not to Bethlehem, where they began, but go north to Nazareth in Galilee, far away from Herod's children. Both in going to Egypt and in growing up in Nazareth, Jesus is fulfilling prophecy. Make way for the king. His father Joseph who leads the family 'out of Egypt' is patterned after the ancient Joseph who saved his family (12 brothers and father Jacob) in Egypt. The connections are unmistakable.

So what is the message of Christmas according to Matthew's rendition of the story? In the original story of Moses and the people, the enemy was external – Pharaoh and slavery in Egypt. In the Christmas story the enemy is within (His name will be 'Jesus' meaning 'he will save his people from their sins.' 1:21). The nation is broken and enslaved because their relationships are broken and they are enslaved by animosity, hate, mistrust and despair (sin). Christmas is about rebuilding relationships or taking stock of where we must let go and where we must commit, where we need to speak truth and where we need to heal wounds. Until the people are reconstructed through love, they cannot be a 'light to the nations.'

What is the state of relationships in your life? How may Christmas become an invitation to rethink them, rebuild, recommit, speak truth, listen, or make some difficult decisions and let go? Christmas according to Matthew's version of the story, is about building and rebuilding relationships inspired by love. That's hard work and a great commitment, especially when there are wounds to be healed.