

Christmas is my favourite time of the year. When I think of Christmas, it is a warm and joyful idea. Carols, time off work, being with family – it's lovely. And for some of us (whether or not that is our personal experience of Christmas), this warm and fussy idea of Christmas comes across into the Gospel explanation of Christmas. However many sermons talk of the poverty of Christmas, the image of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in the stable on the first Christmas Day (captured in countless Christmas cards) emotionally connects with us as cosy and quaint.

And this can lead to a bit of cognitive dissonance around Jesus's life. While there were certainly good things in his life (such as the friendships he enjoyed), we mostly see in his life challenge, opposition and suffering. Rightly, we glorify him for coming down from heaven and enduring that for our salvation. But the Christmas story seems distant from that, perhaps coloured more by our (personal or cultural) experiences of Christmas than by its setting in Jesus's life. If that is a challenge we face, today's passage will dispel it!

It is not often that today's passage is preached on at Christmas. And you can understand why – it does not fit with our general approach to the season. It stands in complete contrast to the 'spirit of Christmas' and relays a message of fear and bloodshed. But every word of the Bible has something to teach us, and as we look at this passage I think we will see more clearly the reality of Christmas – that Jesus came down from heaven to a life of struggle and suffering, and that this began right from the start of his life.

As we look at the passage, I want us to keep in mind the big idea that God is bring His plan to pass. This is the plan – to save us through His son, who would live a perfect life on earth before dying for us on the cross. And that through this, those who believe in Jesus will be raised to glory and an eternity in heaven.

In today's passage, we will see evidence that Jesus is our saviour, the messiah, as Matthew explains how he fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. We will then see how God brings about that plan, protecting Jesus in the face of the danger of the massacre ordered by Herod. From that, I will argue that we take two lessons. Firstly, that in Joseph we see an example of the right way to respond to God, as he leads his family and obeys God. Secondly, that even in the face of powerful (and powerfully evil) opposition God will bring about his plan.

Messianic prophecy

Let's start then by seeing how this passage points to Jesus as the messiah. There are two such messianic prophecies in the passage (plus an additional prophecy fulfilled in verse 18). Remember also that Matthew probably had particularly in mind a Jewish audience when writing, and so illustrating all the ways that Jesus fulfils the Old Testament promises is important to him. There are lots of messianic prophecies which we see fulfilled in the New Testament, so I wouldn't suggest that these are the only or the strongest pieces of evidence for Jesus's identity. And they require some work to understand the prophecy. But nevertheless it is worth understanding them to add to the stock of evidence we see across the Bible.

This passage relates that Jesus fled into Egypt and then returned once it was safe to do so. Matthew tells us in verse 15 that this is a fulfilment of a prophecy: "And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son.'" It is interesting that Matthew sees this as a messianic prophecy, because if we go back to the original verse (Hosea 11:1), we read "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son". So it appears to be a verse about something which happened in the past and to Israel,

rather than something which is going to happen to the messiah. So how can Matthew see this as a prophecy of Jesus? Well, in common with the Jewish tradition of the time, Matthew understands prophecy not only in terms of direct prediction, but also in terms of analogy and allusion. The original verse in Hosea referred to Israel coming out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. But the story of God's people has echoes in the story of the messiah. And so this can also be a reference to the life of Jesus. Indeed, the massacre of the innocents in this passage is another example of this, calling back to Moses being saved from the massacre of the Israelite children in Egypt. God's son fulfils the history of his people in his person.

There is another prophecy at the end of today's passage. Verse 23 says "and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene". You will see that there are a couple of differences here when compared to the prophecies in verses 15 and 18 (or indeed, looking earlier in the chapter, that in verses 5-6). Verse 23 is not represented as a direct quote and the prophecy is attributed to "the prophets" generally rather than "the prophet". This is a claim which considers the general thrust of the Old Testament rather than any particular statement. There are a few theories as to how this fits together given that Nazareth is never even mentioned in the Old Testament. To one straightforward one, it may be as simple as this. Nazareth was not a place of any importance. Not only is it absent from the Old Testament, it is also missing from many other ancient sources (including the Jewish religious texts the Talmud and the Midrashim, and the secular history by Josephus). And the Bible makes clear that the messiah would come from a lowly background (Psalm 22:6, Isaiah 53:3). Being 'Jesus of Bethlehem' could have given him the imprint of royal legacy. It was, after all, the city of David – the great king. Being 'Jesus of Nazareth' would have not brought status. Perhaps the closest we can get is to imagine the comparison between 'John Smith of Windsor' and 'John Smith of some distant village you've never heard of', but even that doesn't capture things as it misses the implication that someone 'of Bethlehem' is actually related to the royal line of David (which in our more transient age would not be implied by saying someone came from Windsor). Therefore, we can understand Matthew here as seeing the Old Testament having prophesied that the messiah would be of low status, and this being fulfilled in him being known as coming from Nazareth.

God protects His plan

So far, so standard for Christmas – we have thought about God coming into the world. However, in between these two prophecies is a section we cannot ignore, as it stands in contrast to everything we are used to at Christmas.

Not everyone was pleased that Jesus had come into the world. Herod was the local ruler of the time. He saw this child as a threat – a rival claimant to the throne which he occupied. And so was determined to put an end to that threat. His first plan had been to have the Magi identify the specific child and let him know who it was. He could then have that child killed. However, that plan failed because the Magi were warned not to return to Herod and went home another way. So Herod then takes an approach with much more collateral damage. He has every boy in the area born in the right timeframe massacred.

Sadly, this massacre is in keeping with Herod's character. He was a murderous individual. He killed the remnants of the dynasty that ruled before him. He killed half of the Sanhedrin. He

killed his wife, his mother, and three of his own sons. Even for ancient times, this was a brutal man.

I'm going to talk today about the massacre in relation to Jesus and the Gospel narrative. But this is not in any way to downplay what must have been the horrendous impact of these events on the other families caught in them, who lost their sons. Nor is it to overlook that some people here have lost children, and reading this passage at Christmas may bring painful emotions for you. We as a church want to support you if that is something you are facing – please do speak to us if you'd like some time to talk individually.

And so, in human terms, God's salvation plan faces a grave threat here. Jesus has come down to earth as a helpless baby to live the life we should have lived and take the punishment we should have suffered for our salvation. But what if he dies at this point he will never do that? What would that mean for humanity's salvation?

As I said at the start, God will not allow His plan to fail. He will protect it and bring it to a successful completion. And we see God acting to do that here. He has already acted by warning the Magi not to go back to Jerusalem. However, Bethlehem and Jerusalem are not that far apart. This may only have bought a couple of days before Herod knew that he had been outwitted. The clock was ticking for Jesus. So God acts to protect him. He sends a warning to Joseph that Jesus's life is in danger and they must escape. Joseph immediately takes the family and leaves during the night. It is a scene fit for a thriller. Joseph leaps up in the middle of the night, waking after the dream. Quickly and quietly he makes Mary and, perhaps carrying a still-sleeping Jesus, they slip away under cover of darkness, just in time to slip through the fingers of Herod's men. I'm sure the film would show Herod's men breaking down their door a few hours later to find an empty house and a still cooling fire, but as the scene is not in our passage we won't speculate on it.

God has acted to supernaturally and providentially protect Jesus and bring him to safety. The family remain in Egypt (also under Roman control and at the time a traditional place where Jews took refuge). When it is eventually safe for them to return, God again acts to keep His plan on track. He sends another dream to Joseph to bring the family back to Israel. And once again, Joseph does so, ultimately settling on Nazareth (both for reasons of safety and perhaps also familiarity (Luke e.g. 1:26, 2:4 and 2:39 suggests this was their place of residence prior to the trip to Bethlehem)).

Therefore, through this moment of grave danger, God protects Jesus and arranges for him to be just where he needs to be to later fulfil the life he came to live.

Application

What can we learn from these events? I'll talk about two things: one application to shape our conduct and one to shape our theology (which will hopefully flow over into our conduct). To inform how we live, we'll look at Joseph as an example of obedience and leadership. To inform what we believe, we'll look at the reassurance we can get from seeing God protect his plan.

We often put a lot of focus in our telling of the birth narrative on Mary over Joseph. In the cliched jokes about primary school politics, people are always worrying about who is cast as Mary, never who is cast as Joseph! But in today's passage, we clearly see Joseph highlighted.

And we see him as a man obedient to God. This continues the pattern we see earlier in the Gospels. When he first hears of Jesus from Mary, he believes that she has cheated on him and needs to call off the marriage. But when God tells him to go forward, he obeys. And here again, when he gets instructions from God he obeys. In verse 13 and 14, we see that it is immediate obedience (leaving in the night after waking from his dream), and it may well have been that anything less would have meant they did not escape in time. And once more, when he receives the instruction to leave Egypt, Joseph obeys. The family may well have been there for some time, perhaps years, and if so would potentially have built a life there. But never the less, on God's command they leave it behind.

Now, it is unlikely to be the case that all of us in all important matters of consequence receive direct instructions from God in the way Joseph did (though if you do, of course obey!). But we do all receive instructions from God on how to live through his word, the Bible. Sometimes, this is straightforward and direct (such as accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour in order to be saved). In these cases, it is straightforward to know what to do. We should seek to do it. In other cases, more thought is needed (such as questions of how to manage money). The challenge I put to us in those situations is that we should not see difficulty in understanding God's call as an excuse of laxity in obeying God's call. It is one thing to say it is difficult to grasp what God wants of us. It is another thing to not want to follow it (or to not want to grasp it). And so I would say that in these situations, I should truly be seeking in our hearts to follow God to the best of our understanding. If we still go wrong, then we can fall back on the loving mercy of our God. But let us seek like Joseph to obey Him.

As well as obedience, in Joseph's actions in this passage we see an example of leadership. Here is a lesson for those in leadership (in contrast to the comments on obedience, which of course are relevant to everyone), and perhaps particularly for husbands and fathers, called like Joseph to lead their family. Because that is what Joseph does here. The message comes to him, not to Mary. And it is his responsibility to get the family to safety and, in due course, to relocate them back to Israel. And this is good leadership because, as we have seen, he exercises it in obedience to God. We would not commend his leadership if he had led the family in having a lie-in in verse 14! But because he led them in the way God had commanded, it is commendable leadership. And so, if you have been called to leadership, as with everyone you should obey God. But your responsibility goes beyond just yourself. You are also responsible for leading others in God's way. What are you doing to achieve that?

Lastly, let's turn to how this passage can shape our theology. As I said at the start, if you were to take one thing from this passage, it would be that God will preserve His plan, even in the face of horrendous evil. His plan that Jesus would come down from heaven and was made man, would be crucified and suffer death, rose again, and will come again in glory and gather his people into his kingdom which will have no end. We see that God has done this in the past in today's passage, and that should give us confidence that He will do so again in the future. Let me be clear, this is not a promise that we individually will be given temporal protection. People in the Bible suffer and die for their faith (as Stephen did) and others are simply subject to indiscriminate evil (as happened to the innocent boys in this passage). God is not promising to protect us from this. But God does promise to bring about the salvation of his people (for example, when Jesus says in John 10:27-28 "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.") And this passage is an example of Him preserving His plan. No natural or supernatural evil will prevent the plan coming to fruition. What's more, we know that there will be attacks on God's plan and His people. So do not be disheartened if you see

faith and the faithful under attack. If it seems like people are persecuted for their faith or faith itself is constrained, or if we see others fall away, or few new people declaring for God. If it seems like the flame of faith flickers and gutters, remember it will not go out. Indeed, God will fan it into such a blaze on the last day! God will protect His plan and bring it to completion!

Conclusion

To summarise what we have seen. We first looked at two of the prophecies in the passage. We saw that they were messianic prophecies and that we can therefore be encouraged as to Jesus's identity as the messiah. We then unpacked this passage's example of how God acts to preserve his plan, even in the face of great evil and threat. Lastly, as we applied the passage to us, we see in it Joseph as an example of obedience to God and godly leadership, and we reflected on the encouragement in challenging circumstances that we can draw from seeing God protect His plan.

So, as this year closes and we embark upon another, let us try to live in obedience to God, and to lead in God's way when called to do so. But most of all, let us be encouraged that, whatever seems to be the case, God will bring about His salvation plan, and live with confidence in Him.

Let's pray.