

# Christmas disruption!

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[0:00] I start with this picture of Christmas disruption.! I offer it with an exclamation mark because it's a popular media story! Whenever there's any disruption over Christmas, it's always Christmas disruption!

! Because it never happens any other time of the year. Does anybody remember this? Has anybody caught up in this? Right. Finsbury Park, last Christmas. Chaos at King's Cross.

People waiting for trains that never arrived. Most years there are pictures of this as well. Heathrow Airport, there's some sort of strike on, planes cancelled.

And then there's the poor people at this time as well in the north of England. Just now we just want to pray that they will be helped and looked after.

It's devastation, isn't it? Facing more flooding. Christmas shouldn't be like this. It should be snow and snowmen and children with sledges and cosy cottages and warm light inviting you to come in and warm yourself around a log fire and indulge in some familiar nostalgia with good endings and happy smiling faces.

[1:20] Have you seen this again and again this year? It is a wonderful life. The Christian tradition has often conspired to offer the same kind of picture of tranquility, harmony and wholesomeness.

The nativity scene is a frozen image of all as it should be. Everybody is gathered. And our traditional songs tend to support the idea of calm and silent and still.

Do you recognize on the right hand side, these are phrases from well-loved carols that we sing all the time. And of course, what we sing is what we expect. For many people, the high point of Christmas preparations is three o'clock on Christmas Eve afternoon.

And the spine-tingling sensation of hearing the piping tones of a treble entering King's College Chapel, Cambridge and singing once in Royal David City as you're preparing your turkey.

And after the rush to buy presents with wall-to-wall carols as a backdrop, sitting down with mulled wine and listening to classic FM, go to town.

[2:41] I didn't realize until this year that there is actually a complete radio station dedicated to Christmas music. You could actually have it 24-7. But of course, none of this touches the more messy reality of what life is really like.

And what it must have been like 2,000 years ago in noisy, confusing, occupied Palestine. Palestine. Or indeed, what it's like in Bethlehem this morning.

The Gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, offer us stories of real people with real lives who were each drawn into a storyline plotted from eternity.

And who each find themselves encountering a baby. It really was a meeting point of some very different people all coming together and encountering the baby Jesus.

And for all of them, it was not actually an experience of calm and peace, but one of upset and disruption with deep and often troubling emotions. We could look at the likes of the old couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, or perhaps the prophetess, Anna.

[4:06] Or at the other end of life, the young, perhaps very young, Mary. Or even the dark story of a king called Herod. And the glimpse parts played by other people.

But as illustrations of disrupted lives because of the birth of Jesus, this morning I want us to look at four, maybe three groups of people. They happen to be male, but the lessons of their experience are universal, and they speak to our real lives today.

So, let us start with the wise men, or Magi. And Matthew talks of them in his Gospel, chapter 2, verses 1 to 12.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed at all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

[5:23] In Bethlehem in Judea, they replied. For this is what the prophet has written. But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and make a careful search for the child.

As soon as you find him, report to me so that I too may go and worship him. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.

And they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

[6:39] Now these are shadowy figures of an uncertain past or place. Stargazers, certainly, but also people who had learned that there were things to be found by looking in the skies.

Something to be understood. They came from the east. They were foreigners of some sort from a probably distant place.

They've seen something remarkable, a special star, or maybe the unusually close relationship of one star to several others. They've not seen this before.

And their tradition tells them that some great person is about to be born as the king of the Jews. So they drop everything, leave the day job, home and family, and make a long and no doubt difficult and risky journey in pursuit of this one idea.

They think it worth the disruption to their lives to make that journey. Now there's plenty of legend and myth about these Magi, these wise men.

[7:53] We don't know how many there were. We don't know their names. We don't know their ages. The Bible leaves that unsaid. But what it does say, and therefore what it gives us encouragement to focus upon this morning, is this.

Firstly, that they're not Jewish people. They're Gentiles. The world at that time, and in Bible language, is divided into the Jewish people, the descendants of Abraham, and the rest.

And the rest are Gentiles. They're not descended from Abraham. They have not received the particular promises of God that God gave to Abraham and those who would follow him.

Well, not precisely, not directly, but there were hints. There were hints in the Old Testament scriptures that God did indeed have blessings and promises to be made for Gentile peoples.

And these people, these wise men, they tell us, they encourage us to know that God is calling people from far distances, away from the confines of his promised people, the Jews, to come to know him.

[9:18] Or as John puts it, God so loved the world that he gave his son. And it's always encouraging us for us to look at these things, because we always have to remind ourselves this morning that not many of us are blood descendants of Abraham today.

But we are descendants of the rest. We are of the Gentiles. We are of the people who are represented by these wise men.

And the second thing we see, and very clearly so, is that they are seeking people. They are seeking people. They were looking for a special baby boy.

They make a long journey, and they ask a very good question at the beginning of the passage we read. Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? That's a great question to ask. It's a great question for all of us to ask today. Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? They're seeking him. And it's a wonderful thing for any of us to be a seeker, to ask questions, to be needy enough to know and realize that we need to know more.

[10:37] Even more wonderful to be a seeker of Jesus. And that was what these men were. They didn't know his name.

They had very little to go on. But what they had and what they used led them right into the presence of Jesus. Notice that they didn't seem to have any knowledge of God's holy book, the Bible. They followed a star. There's nothing in the Bible about a special star. There's no promises in the Old Testament about following a star.

But God used something unusual, something that they could understand and that was real to them to draw them to Jesus.

And so it is for us. And this is deeply encouraging. God can and does use ordinary things in our lives to call us to himself. Some of you have experienced something like this in the last year.

[11:49] Well, thank God for it and follow the star that God has given to you. But did you notice something else in this story? The wise men ask questions of people who should have good answers.

They ask around. They ask the Jewish people they should know. And eventually this leads to the opening up of a 600-year-old part of the Old Testament.

A prophecy and the mention of the town of Bethlehem. This little and unremarkable town of Bethlehem. And they're directed to exactly the right place.

So in the end, it wasn't just the star, but it was also the word of God. God's word speaks of Jesus because essentially it is all about him.

So I do want to encourage you today, if you find yourself to be a star-seeking person, to be actually getting into the place where you read the Bible.

[12:50] Because the Bible is the place where most clearly of all, you will come to find the one who has been born King of the Jews. You will begin to recognize, to notice the wonderful person of Jesus Christ.

And you can too experience the promise that God gave through his prophet Jeremiah.

When he says, you will seek me, and you will find me, when you seek me with all your heart. Gentiles, seekers.

We're probably in both those categories. And even if, as a Christian, we need to be Jesus-seeking people still. Now, shepherds.

So let's turn to Luke chapter 2, verses 8 to 20. And we'll come on to that picture later. Luke chapter 2, verses 8 to 20.

[14:06] And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you.

He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.

When the angel had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let's go to Bethlehem. See this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

So they hurried off, and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.

[15:20] And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

I could have given you a picture of a shepherd, but actually, well, there are lots of pictures of shepherds, and actually shepherds have a pretty good pedigree in our minds.

We love going up on the downs, and perhaps we might see a shepherd, we certainly see some sheep. But pictures of shepherds wouldn't probably give you a very accurate portrait of the kind of people who are mentioned in Luke's story.

We have a pretty positive view of shepherds, but in the first century, shepherds in Israel did not have a good reputation. They were lumped together with the tax collectors, and they were called people of the dirt.

Even more colorful language, which I won't even give you this morning. They were considered so unreliable and unreliable that they couldn't act as a witness in a court of law.

[16:51] When shepherds were around, stuff went missing. It was bad news when shepherds came to town.

And their job prevented doing religious things, like attending ceremonies and going to Jerusalem. And it's interesting that Luke himself says here, they were living out in the fields.

That's where they were. Whilst many of the Christmas characters are recorded in the Bible record as being righteous, upright, blameless, nothing is said about these people in that way.

Of course, we don't know for sure exactly what their characters were like. But I'm just saying that if you were a Jewish person living in Bethlehem at the time, and somebody mentioned the shepherds, you'd immediately have had a thought in your head about the sort of characters they were.

Steer well clear of the shepherds. It's a remarkable thought, isn't it? You see it in that way. Because we have this idea of a sort of wizened old man with a long beard and a nice crook and very sort of pastorally looking after his flock.

[18:11] These are rough people. And as I was searching through a suitable picture, I came across these. I was looking first for navvies. You know the navvies?

The navvies were the people who built the railways and the canals in the country. When the navvies came to town, you locked your doors. They were known as hard-drinking, hard-living people.

They came as an army. And it was pretty fearful when they were around. Well, these aren't quite navvies. It's actually a very interesting picture and it's the 1850s and they're actually in front of the building of the Crystal Palace in Sydenham.

But they have a sort of look about them. They're the sort of people you probably don't want to meet in a group at 11 o'clock on a Saturday night.

They had a reputation that everybody already knew about. Allow for all that and how astonishing that not one but eventually a legion of angels appears to them and apparently to no one else.

[19:24] How is the sky opened and did not everybody in Bethlehem see this thing? Apparently not. A miracle.

The sky is opened. It's filled with the angels but they are only seen. It appears by these shepherds. How many shepherds? We don't know. They were keeping watch which means they were keeping the watches of the night.

One was awake and maybe there were two others who were asleep at the time and they are visited by this array of angels with such a great proclamation.

Interesting too that they are able to say later on this is what the Lord has told us. It wasn't just that they recognized that these were strange alien beings but they were able to hear those words those angel words as the word of the Lord.

And I remind you that these will be people without religious pedigree and background but they receive a direct revelation from God.

[20:41] I call them the unlikely. They really are the most unlikely people. What an astonishing thing it is that God made his truth known to these particular people.

Meeting them exactly where they were and would expect it to be. not in the synagogue but out on the field. How condescending of God that he meets us just where we are.

And how glad and grateful we can be to find that people who were bad news for everyone they met actually received good news.

And those considered so unreliable as to be disparted from being witnesses in a court became some of the best tellers of this good news to others as well.

There must be laughter in heaven over some of the things that God does. I love the stories of the unlikely that remind us that God's hand is not too short that he cannot save anyone.

[22:01] And of course that's what God delights to do. So let me tell you about Barrington Williams Barrington Williams with a name like that you've got to have a great future.

But he wasn't heading in that direction when we pick up the story violence seemed to haunt Barrington from his early school days a so-called friend from school turned a 12-bore shotgun on him once while they were out shooting.

He was made to crawl and to beg for his life. My friend was a notorious criminal from the age of 11. We had a fight one Saturday and he was simply getting his own back. I pleaded with him not to shoot me and he pressed the shotgun against my temple and swore at me and more it shook me up.

The incident which finally drove him to seek help at church involved a mate of his who was related to the Tongan royal family. His friend's uncle who had been a heavyweight boxer had just been shot in Chesterfield.

My friend was a big bully. He must have fallen out with me after I stopped him beating up a Chinese lad. My crazy friend tried to take my head off with a Japanese sword in his own uncle's house.

[23:24] I believe I received my sprinting speed that day. I escaped from the house and never went back. Barrington's sister had returned home from Nigeria. Death was really occupying his mind so she suggested that he should go to church.

Having nothing else to do he went along. At the end of the meeting one man asked him to come back another time. He promised and as he never liked to tell lies he returned. In fact for the first time in his life he had found somebody interested in him.

At school he'd been very shy but this man had brought him out of himself. On one occasion a Yorkshireman came to the church to preach. He explained about the love of God who sent Christ into the world to die for my sins.

I'd never experienced love in my family which by this time had broken up. And anyway I had always been too big to show individual love to any one member. The preacher explained how Christ wanted to come into my life which at that time was very unhappy and sad.

He spoke about heaven and hell. I knew I wanted the love of God and wanted to go to heaven one day. For some reason the message went right to my heart.

[24:38] It was as though nobody else was in that little church except me. I felt that God was speaking only to me. I looked around. Nobody else seemed to be affected.

I felt very uncomfortable. I realised that I'd done wrong in my life. That night believing Christ had died paying the penalty for my sin I asked Christ who had risen from the dead to come and live in my life.

It was tough at first but slowly I got stronger as a Christian as I read the Bible and prayed day by day. If you'd like to read more stories like this please ask me I've got a copy of this book for you. It's because of stories like the shepherds and Barrington Williams that we have a great hope for anybody and everybody in this city of Brighton.

Amen. Amen. That the unlikely will have a genuine encounter with Jesus Christ because Jesus knows how to speak to them.

[25:44] Jesus knows what needs to be done in their lives. Jesus can talk to them in language that they can understand. And Jesus has the power not only to speak to them but to change them.

Thirdly let's look at Joseph. So our reading is Matthew chapter 1 verses 18 to 24. 5. This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.

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. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had 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 as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

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 said through the prophet the virgin will be

with child and will give birth to a son they will call him Emmanuel which means God with us.

[27:26] When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife but he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son and he gave him the name Jesus.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. In all the references to Joseph in the writings of Matthew and Luke you get a sense of the solid honorableness of this man.

He's a good man but he's a man facing multiplied troubles. The first trouble is the fact that Mary is pregnant and it's definitely not by Joseph.

And when we read the word that he is pledged to be married to her please don't think of that as a kind of casual engagement situation. He is locked into a lifetime with her.

It is as strong as the marriage bond. In a conservative society this is a terrible problem. And you can see that Joseph agonizes over what to do.

[28:43] So he wrestles with this problem. There's no easy and painless solution. Whatever way he looks at it there are going to be long lasting social consequences.

There will be rumors. There's reputation. There's loss of face. There's loss of business. there's future prospects. It's awful. What thoughts must have run through Joseph's mind?

And I thought of this song back in the 60s. Yesterday all my troubles seem so far away.

Now it looks as though they're here to stay. Oh I believe in yesterday. suddenly I'm not half the man I used to be. There's a shadow hanging over me. Yesterday came suddenly.

It all looked so promising. The planning and the thoughts of their life together as a very typical Jewish family. Now this was all badly unraveling nightmarishly before him.

[29:59] And this is all happening before he's received any direct guidance from God. So please notice in verse 20 it says but after he had considered this an angel of the Lord appeared to him.

God gave him what he needed but still there was something to be done and he did it in verse 24 which says when Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him.

But this is only the beginning of Joseph's troubles and surely Matthew and also Luke wants us to be clear just how much trouble kept on dogging Joseph's life because of Jesus.

Astonishingly there are actually five more instances when he faced great difficulty because of the reality of the birth of Jesus. We won't read all of them but they're listed down on the screen for you there.

The first is the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. So it had to be done. The census was called he had to make the journey and it's a long journey it's 85 miles of a journey to be made but rather than being able to make it by himself he has to take a pregnant wife with him with no clarity as to what they would do once they arrived.

[31:40] in Matthew 2 after the wise men came the threat of Herod's killing of Bethlehem's baby boys and again an angel spoke to Joseph and again he obeyed and he took the much longer journey to Egypt and in Matthew 2 verse 19 there's another dream and another angel voice and more obedience is required and it ends in Matthew 2 verses 22 to 23 where there's another dream another angel voice and there's more obedience four times I'm counting the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream four times he had to be obedient and it didn't all end when Jesus was just a toddler because the one other record that we have of Joseph is the story of Jesus getting lost in the temple in Jerusalem more trouble more distress more anguish it was a hard thing for

Joseph what he had to go through Joseph then disappears from Bible sight but we have enough to learn from these passages two great truths about this honorable man and two truths which hopefully are helpful for us firstly that trouble in the Christian life may well sit side by side to come near to Jesus Christ is not to be removed from trouble but indeed may bring you into trouble with the birth of Jesus Joseph's life was in a state of flux and discomfort but he kept on listening to God and doing what God told him to do what a great man what an enormous encouragement for us all not only did he survive by repeatedly trusting God but he became a better man for it trouble is not our enemy in

God's hand it's the place of opportunity for us to find out how great and good God is and secondly let's think about Joseph's influence on Jesus life Joseph might well have abandoned Mary when he heard of the pregnancy but he stuck with her and became a husband to her and a father to Jesus he could so easily have been an absentee parent but he wasn't and in Jewish society and tradition it would have been Joseph who had prime responsibility for teaching Jesus the scriptures and encouraging him spiritually and being a good father to the boy despite all his own personal traumas and discouragements this is clearly what he did so we have the beautiful verse in

Luke 2 verse 52 where it says Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men and later Jesus as a grown man in his thirties he can talk to his own followers and disciples say which of you fathers which of you fathers would give bad gifts to his children that's a lovely thought to know and realise Jesus didn't come sort of ready built with wisdom and knowledge but he had a process of learning and the chief participant in the learning in that family group would have been Joseph the teaching that was given to Jesus so sound and solid was that teaching that Jesus grew in wisdom and in favour with

God and man he was a great father encouragement for all of us isn't it all these lives were disrupted and I think disrupted forever the magi the shepherds Joseph by an encounter with Jesus Christ but the biggest life disruption the biggest life disruption was actually for Jesus himself Paul encapsulates this for us in some words in Philippians chapter 2 in the message version when the time came Jesus set aside the privileges of deity took on the status of a slave becoming human having become human he stayed human it was an incredibly humbling process he didn't claim special privileges instead he lived a selfless obedient life and then died a selfless obedient death and the worst kind of death at that a crucifixion for every other baby the single trauma is to leave the comfort and warmth of a mother's womb but for

[37:21] Jesus it was infinitely more he made a journey not just of a few centimeters of travel but one from the glory of heaven to the limitations of a broken world this was a very personal disruption of place time circumstance!

relationships and experience culminating in the horror of death with an overwhelming sense of God's anger God's son did this for us he chose to become like us that he might meet with us at and on our level he chose to become a man so that he might be able to learn to obey God as a man in a way that we have never done and he did that in his life and he chose to become human so that he could actually take the full punishment that all humans deserve for our sin against the holy God and he did that by his death and he did all this because he loves us and wants to save us and this was how much the son of God was disrupted and he comes to us today by the retelling of this story he comes to us this morning through the words of scripture so

I have this prayer for you may you not have a normal and ultimately fading and disappointing Christmas but may your life be wonderfully and forever disrupted by Jesus Christ may you not have a normal and ultimately fruitless 2016 but may your life be wonderfully and forever changed as you grow in your knowledge of Jesus Christ probably with troubles on the way may the disrupting presence and power of Jesus Christ disrupt all our lives this year filling and transforming everything that we're going through so that in everything and in every way we may meet with Jesus!