

O Come All Ye Faithful

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] I want to add my welcome to James. Great to have you here at the 8 o'clock service on Christmas Eve. Lovely to see you. Now the first recorded, the first account of the birth of Jesus in the New Testament comes to us from Matthew's Gospel.

And if you'd like to just turn back a page to page 8, you'll be able to follow along. And I hope you can see how carefully it's told.

It's told with such reserve and delicacy that if you blink, you feel like you're going to miss the creator and king of heaven and earth becoming a human being.

And Matthew's completely aware that we have absolutely no measuring stick for this. We've got no algorithm with which we can comprehend this. You can't fit it into any neat category.

You can't escape it. And so what he does in this little passage, which is a bit of a masterpiece really, is he does two things. First, he tells the story from Joseph's point of view.

[1 : 11] Because the coming of Jesus, the virgin conception of Jesus, was not just inconvenient and irritating. It was completely invasive for him.

And his fears and his pain take up more space than the great miracle of the incarnation itself. And he shows us, firstly, how God draws Joseph to be able to cope with this news.

And the second thing Matthew does is, you notice in verse 22, Matthew breaks into the narrative and tells us that we're going to have to cope with this as well.

So I have two points. One, how does Joseph cope with the birth of Jesus? Two, how do we cope with the birth of Jesus? Number one, how does Joseph deal with the reality of the baby?

In verse 18, as it begins, Matthew tells us that Joseph and Mary are betrothed. We don't have this today. It's more than being engaged. It's a marriage-like state, but it's not yet consummated.

[2 : 13] Verse 18, now the birth of Jesus, the genesis of Jesus took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

And with that little phrase, we're thrown right into the depth of Joseph's pain. There's been no sexual contact between them. Suddenly he discovers the woman he loves, the woman who he's intending to marry, is pregnant.

You don't have to have a good imagination to think of his betrayal. I mean, she's obviously not the person I thought she was. She's been with another man and she said nothing.

I am going to be publicly humiliated. I just, I do not understand how could she possibly do this.

Verse 19, a husband Joseph being a just man and unwilling to put it to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

You can sense the struggle in Joseph here, can't you? This is beyond him morally. To say that he is a just man means that he is a law abider.

[3 : 24] He sticks to the law and that would mean in this context divorcing Mary and exposing her to public shame. But we're told a second thing about him and that he's not only just, but he's also very kind.

He still loves Mary. And so despite what he sees as her clear betrayal, he decides, I don't want her to be publicly shamed or wounded. And then God steps in, verse 20.

As he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear. Do not fear to take Mary as your wife for that which is conceived in her, genesis in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Now, our dreams, or my dreams, mostly have to do with my anxieties and what I've eaten the night before or the day of. This is not an ordinary dream.

This is an Old Testament way of God revealing to particular people what he means and what he's doing. And now it's the angel of the Lord that gets straight to it.

[4 : 33] He gets straight to it. And notice the order of the angel of the Lord in verse 20. First, he says, marry her. Don't be afraid. Second, the child is God incarnate.

It's almost as though the most astonishing fact in history that the creator and king of the universe becoming a human being is the solution for one man's terrible, troubling situation.

In just a couple of words, God opens the deepest and most unfathomable mystery to Joseph as the resolution to Joseph's problem, enabling him to deal with the reality of the birth of Jesus.

If he believes what God is saying and then obeys it, he has to make the child his own. Now, why? Why does Matthew tell us the story this way from Joseph's point of view?

I think it is to show us that the essence of Christianity is that it's about salvation and to show us the powerlessness of human morality.

[5 : 38] Because Christianity is a religion where God saves us. We don't save ourselves. And there's nothing in Christianity that makes sense apart from that. And Matthew makes that point in two ways.

First, he highlights Joseph's excellent moral qualities back there in verse 19. He's just and his kindness. But all the justice and all the kindness in the world cannot prepare him for the coming of God in the flesh.

The creator of the universe entering the womb of Mary in the form of a vulnerable dependent child. You see, all our morality cannot reach up to God.

It just can't comprehend something so remarkable and unique. It requires God to step in and speak. And the second way Matthew makes this point is that the angel tells Joseph that the baby comes from God with a name already.

And the name is about salvation. Verse 21. She'll bear a son. You don't need to go to an ultrasound. And you'll call his name Jesus. For he will save his people from their sins.

[6 : 50] This child in the womb that comes from the Holy Spirit is a boy. And here is his name. Jesus means God saves. You'll call him that, God says, because he, emphatic, he and no one else will save his people from their sins.

So for all our moral goodness, and there's a lot of it around. Our situation is so dire, we need saving.

And we need saving so much that God has to enter our human reality. And the evil that he has come to rescue us from is evil itself. The evil within us.

But the saving that Jesus has come to do is not for everyone. Jesus is only going to save his people from their sins. Only those people who are going to recognize their lostness. Only those people who have come to him and received him as their God.

Only those who have come to him for saving can say we are his people. And it is at this point that people usually say that makes Christianity so narrow and exclusive.

[8 : 06] I mean, you're saying that if this is God in the flesh, then it demands we worship Jesus. We see him as the only way to God. Bow to him and serve him as our God.

I want to say it's not narrow and exclusive. It's a different diagnosis. You see, every other great world religion says that what's really important is that you follow our teachings.

You lead a life that's morally and ethically excellent according to our teachers. And if you do that, you'll reach enlightenment or you'll reach God or you'll reach nirvana.

Christianity comes along with a completely different diagnosis. It's a different verdict on what's wrong. Christianity says that our situation is so dire we need saving.

And that all our morality and goodness cannot bring us to God. And that the Son of God has to leave heaven to become one of us, to live for us, to die for us, to save us from our sins.

[9 : 06] And that fellowship with God comes only as we place our faith in him and not in our own goodness. And that's not narrow and exclusive. It's just a different diagnosis.

We have friends in the United States whose daughter suffered for years from recurring sickness. And she went to a list of doctors who treated her for asthma-like symptoms. But it was not asthma. During this time, they're having some work done on their drain pipes. And the contractor came to them one day and said there's black mold in the bedroom wall of their daughter. Okay, so when the contractor comes and gives you his verdict, did they say to him, that's terribly narrow and exclusive?

It's a different diagnosis. It was a very inconvenient diagnosis. They had to move out of their house for close to a year and have very expensive renovations. And their daughter recovered quickly. The angel words to Joseph tell us that all our justice and all our goodness are not enough. We need a radical solution. We don't need more rules and practices.

[10:13] We need the Son of God to come for us and to die for us and to give him our allegiance and worship. And we read down in verse 24, when Joseph woke from sleep, He did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

Took his wife, didn't know her until she'd given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. That's how he comes to terms with the reality of Jesus. He hears God's word and he obeys. And just in case we begin to think this is more about Joseph than us, secondly, how do we cope with the birth of Jesus?

Before he even finishes the Joseph narrative, Matthew interrupts his own narrative at verse 22. Because he wants to see that this has universal significance for us as well. Verse 22.

All this took place, says Matthew. To fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

All of this took place. This vast and astonishing miracle. The angel of the Lord coming. The entry of the Son of God into humanity. Matthew says, This is the actual presence of God with us.

[11:29] That's what Emmanuel means. In contrast to all the signs and symbols and shadows of his presence in the Old Testament. And how glad we are. Because whenever God appeared in the Old Testament, his appearance was terrifying.

Whirlwind. Consuming fire. Pillar of smoke. But here God takes all his majesty and his glory and his power and places it in a human form. For this reason.

So that he might be God with us. To enter into personal and loving intimacy with us. He enters our flesh to become flesh of our flesh.

Some people mock Christians who talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior. And sometimes we Christians deserve it. We speak about it as though we've had the one experience that puts us ahead of the rest of people.

But you see, you can experience God and not really meet him personally. It is possible to have a general sense of God in the mountains or in the sunset or in the ocean.

[12:32] It's a different thing to meet him personally. Emmanuel means that through this one Jesus, we can meet God and know him personally. That he will come into our life in all his glory.

And he has come into this world in such a way, not to crush us or to destroy us, but to give us life and salvation. There's nothing in Christianity that makes sense apart from this.

It's only this that makes sense of Jesus' claims. Where he claims to know all that God knows and to do all that God does and to reveal the Father perfectly. Because all the fullness of God dwelt in him bodily.

It also explains why Jesus unerringly welcomes and receives when people worship him. You know, in the Bible, when angels turn up, humans often bow down and worship them.

And the angels say, get up. Whatever you do, don't worship me. I'm a creator. We both have a creator. We're both creatures. We're on this side of the creator-creature line.

[13:37] Worship God alone. But when Thomas gets on his knees and says, my Lord and my God, Jesus receives it. And the first people who believed in Jesus and followed Jesus are the last people in the world you expect to do this.

They're first century Jews. I mean, in the Greek world, sometimes the gods got dressed up in human form, usually with some sordid motive. But those who read and believed the Old Testament believed that God was the creator, infinitely greater and transcendent than creation.

To even imagine that a human could be God in the flesh was blasphemous nonsense, a crass contradiction. But it was fundamental to the faith of the early Christians and to their worship.

We read that they prayed to Jesus as Lord. They worshipped him and confessed him to be God in the flesh. They baptised others in his name and they proclaimed salvation only in him.

They said he alone gives repentance, forgiveness and salvation. The fact that Jesus is called Emmanuel means he didn't leave his deity in heaven, but he willingly accepts all the poverty of the human experience, vulnerable to suffering, to hunger, to weakness and to death.

[14 : 54] It's not that God somehow comes into a human pod form and is not affected by it, nor that he sort of clothes himself with a human body.

He enters fully into human life. He takes a human soul and a human body and he enters completely into the physical life and emotional life. His manhood is complete and his manhood is permanent. So when he lived and when he died, he died as God and man. When he rose again, he rose as God and man. And now tonight he rules as God as man. And this he did, this all he did, so that he could be with us and we could be with him.

Because that is what salvation means. That's the miracle we sing about tonight. That's why Matthew tells us his name is Emmanuel right in the middle of the Joseph story. It's really not about being good or bad.

It's about whether you and I are with Christ and he with us. We come to him and we say, thank you, Lord. You owe me nothing.

[16 : 02] I'm entitled to nothing. You've come to save me from my sins. I want to be with you. I want you to be with me. We receive it with open arms. That's the fundamental posture.

And I think if this miracle is true, we just can't be apathetic about it. Now, you can't put Jesus on the list of favorites or priorities. Can't be impartial and neutral.

We either give ourselves to him without reserve or we run away or we kill him for blasphemy, as happened. And I think this is where the hymns and carols help us so much. We've just sung, come let us adore him.

And as we try and respond to this in our hearts, I'm going to ask Emma to come out and to sing to us for just a moment. And as she sings, pray to him that he might be Emmanuel to you.

Amen. Amen.