

Advent Bible Studies 1986 1

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 December 1986

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] And verse 18 following, which is the birth of Jesus in Matthew's version. So we have to...

That's page 779 in the Red Bibles. What you have there, I'm not sure I know. 7-7.

Matthew 1, verse 18. 7-8. 8-30.

I'll put that there so I don't.. Matthew 1, verse 18.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ 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 of the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 30] And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us.

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took his wife, but knew her not until she had born a son, and called his name Jesus.

Let's just pray. Our God and Father, as Joseph, it's recorded, considered these things, to seek to understand them in the circumstances of his life, give us grace that by your Holy Spirit we too may consider these things.

and seek to understand them in the circumstances of our life. We ask this in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ.

[3 : 39] Now, the story is so desperately familiar, isn't it? I mean, you have heard it time and time again.

I don't know if you are at that state in life where you've started to sort one story out from another. That is, the story in John, which I told you last week was the, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, which is John's somewhat more philosophical approach to this.

Or if you go with Mark, who bypassed the whole birth narrative of Christ and began with John the Baptist, behold the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

Or if you go back to Luke, who, writing this gospel to bear witness to the facts concerning Jesus Christ, begins his letter addressing it to his friends, and then begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist, and then the conception of Mary and the taking of Jesus to the temple and the circumcision rite and all leading up to the most complete account of Jesus' early childhood, right up to the age of 12 when he went up with Joseph and Mary to the temple.

So the stories are quite different, and we should, at this stage, as we go through the Christmas season, be able to read our Christmas cards and the various hymns and songs of Christmas and to say, oh yes, that's according to John, and that's according to Luke, and that's according to Matthew, and just to sort out the different approaches they make.

[5 : 40] The significance of this approach, though, let me tell you in the first instance, is that scholars have concluded, and I think pretty decisively, that it doesn't begin as it says it begins here, and it may be some help to you to realize this, but it's the beginning of, and that word is Genesis.

There's another Genesis here, because Genesis means beginning. The beginning, or the birth of Jesus Christ, is really the birth, or, again, it's Genesis, if you want, of the Christ, and that Jesus doesn't, in fact, appear in the best manuscripts, so that it's, or the manuscript evidence, you might say, because you know that they work with almost hundreds of manuscripts in looking at these texts.

The manuscript evidence suggests that this is what, in fact, is said, that it is the birth of the Christ, and Christ is not Jesus' last name, but Jesus' role in history.

He is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, and that's what Christ means. That's why we talk about our children being Christ-end, or christened, meaning that they are anointed, and, of course, that happens in the Orthodox churches where there is water and oil involved in baptism.

We don't usually, though I think it's possible in the new book of Alternative Services, to use oil to anoint children at baptism, but that means that they are Christ-end.

[7 : 51] That's why the Queen is anointed at her coronation with oil as the Anointed One of God. This is the person who not by process of democratic election, but by the eternal purposes of God, has been chosen by God to be the supreme ruler of this country.

And we acknowledge that in the anointing of the Queen at the coronation. And so, Jesus is the Chosen One, the One whom God from all eternity has chosen to be the man who is to be the Anointed One of God, the One whom God has chosen to be the supreme ruler ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

He is the Anointed One, the Christ. So, it took place, as we're told, in this way.

You might be interested to see that there is a kind of spiritual parallel to this in the beginning of the Gospel of John.

When it talks about in John chapter 1 and verse 12, which is on page 876 in the Red Bible, it says, to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

[10 : 02] And so, the birth of Christ and the new birth into Christ take place not according to a biological process, not in accordance with our common human ancestry, nor by reason of adultery or fornication, but by fulfillment of the purpose of God.

So, when a child is born of the flesh, as it describes, you then bring that child to the church in order that it might be born again of God, so that its ancestry is not just locked in its genetic code, but that its ancestry is locked in the eternal purpose of God toward that child from the beginning.

Do you see the difference? And it makes a great deal of difference when you understand that that's who people are, that they are born again of the will of God in order that God's purpose might be acknowledged by them and fulfilled in them.

And so, the birth of Jesus Christ, the Christ, is that he is born of God to fulfill God's purpose.

And in verse 18 goes on, when his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph. Joseph. Now, this betrothal probably took place in what we would call almost teeny boppers, you know, just 13 or 14 years of age.

[12:11] And so that Mary could have been very young indeed when this happened. Now, that's probably largely a cultural thing because you occasionally find in society that a woman is a woman at 13 or 14 years of age and a man is a man at 13 or 14 years of age.

But we have extended that so that doesn't happen to 21 or 23 years of age. So it's a different way of looking at us. But she was probably very young and her parents and Joseph's parents or family would contract together that these two would be married.

That's the betrothal that is spoken of here and it was legally binding. It wasn't... I mean, we fill out the forms with the province of British Columbia when a couple come and have actually taken their vows in church.

Then the document goes into the Department of Vital Statistics of the province of British Columbia and they have a legally binding and registered contract which exists between them and which they cannot defy easily.

Well, that happened at betrothal in this stage and that was that when the betrothal took place, they were legally married.

[13:49] But, for a year after that, the bride would not go to be with the husband. That would wait for the marriage feast when the bridegroom and all his friends would come and knock on the door of her parents' home and claim his bride.

That would be a great surprise, as you know from the I don't think it would be a surprise at all. But the idea of the parable of the seven wise and seven foolish virgins who are waiting for the bridegroom to come and they don't know at what hour he's coming.

At what hour they will hear coming through the streets towards them the party of young men who surround the bridegroom coming to claim his bride. And so they're waiting.

And that was what happened for a year. But the legal side of it had already been contracted. The marriage side of it had not yet been contracted.

And so it was in that period when Mary betrothed Joseph before they came together, before Joseph came and claimed her and took her to his own house, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit.

[15:17] And that's the fact is that she was discovered to be pregnant. And the writer, Matthew, puts in here a little sort of excerpt saying of the Holy Spirit because he wants to be sure that the readers don't fall into the same trap that Joseph fell into.

You were told right away what the situation was, that she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. So we understand from the beginning what the principles in the story didn't understand and didn't get clear until later on in the story.

that she was found to be with child. And when it says with child of the Holy Spirit, one of the things that offends Dr., you know, our famous missionary doctor from St.

John's, who's off traveling around the world now, Dr. Lionel Gurney, he says, don't use the gospel of John with Muslims because they always reduce it to the fact that God came down and had intercourse with a woman and Jesus was born.

And that they have that rather, I mean, we don't go in for those unrefined ways of looking at it, but the Muslims apparently do and they're terribly offended by the whole idea.

[17:00] And so they don't, you don't need to cause trouble by trying to show that to them. And in fact, the commentators, when it says she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit, the implication is deliberately not that, that as the Holy Spirit brooded over the face of the deep in the beginning of creation.

The Holy Spirit anyway, in Hebrew, is feminine, it's not masculine, and in Greek it's neuter, not feminine or masculine. So that it's not a kind of, the Holy Spirit did not fulfill the male function, but God by a divine agent as working in creation brought Mary to the point where she was with child.

It was a divine act that she was found to be with child. I had an old Bible study, a Bible class teacher who did a great deal of work on this in defending the theory of the virgin birth against the materialistic and scientific world that wanted to claim that this was quite impossible that that could happen.

And I don't think anybody even thinks that it isn't impossible. But, you know, the problem, as somebody stated so beautifully, with Jesus and miracles is that the fact is that it's not a miracle that these things did happen, it would be a miracle if these things didn't happen, because of who you're dealing with.

And so, his argument was that in the seed of the woman, there was the continuing sinless perfection of man, which was only of the human race.

[19 : 12] Well, it's only in the seed of the man, that, joining with the seed of the woman, that sin is bred into us. Now, I think that's stimulating.

I'm not sure that it's very fruitful to consider all that, but there's a tremendous amount of argument that goes on around this because of the dogma of the virgin birth, as to just how it happened, how it could happen.

And the gospel of Matthew is very simple in saying that it happened by the agency of God's Holy Spirit. And it was of the order of creation, not of the order of procreation.

We are procreators with God, but God is the creator. And so you have that given to you as an assurance just at the beginning of this story.

So, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit in that period of up to a year between the time she was betrothed to Joseph and the time she was claimed by Joseph and taken to his home.

[20 : 30] So, in verse 19, her husband Joseph being a just man. Now, it's very difficult to know what it means that Joseph was a just man, that he was a law-abiding man.

It's a... You come across this in, you know, I think, in a startling way for people like you and me from our emancipated and liberated Western ways of thought.

And when you go to a Muslim country, I got into great difficulty because it seemed to me ridiculous to see Muslims observing the law because I have lived in a culture and in a society which says, you know, the law should be observed for good reason.

You know, there is good reason to live within the covenant of marriage. There is good reason to live within the agreed kind of consensus of the community that you are a part of.

There's good reason for that. And if there isn't good reason for that, then there's liable to be a breakdown in the law. You know, there's a...

[22 : 08] And but what Muslims do, and you've got to, I think you've got to understand this, that when they get the law, it's the law of God.

And you obey it simply because it is the law of God. You don't start arguing with it or reasoning with it or deciding whether it's good or whether it's bad.

You do it because it's the law of God. And so in the Old Testament, it's the law of God that if a woman was found pregnant by the man who had claimed her to be, or found unfaithful, not a virgin, by the man who had claimed her to be his husband, or his wife, then the thing to do was for him to make a public accusation.

This is at one stage in the life of the Old Testament, and she would be publicly stoned to death. And that was the law of God. Now, that's why it's, I mean, if you read books like the Hajj and so on, you find that the position of women in a Mohammedan society is a very tenuous position indeed, because there is no appeal against the law of God.

If this is what has to be, this is what will be, and there is no argument against it. I was shocked last week to hear a story which really intrigued me, and I haven't really got over thinking about it.

[23 : 53] But somebody put into a church a book in the last few years stating how God could heal homosexuality.

And the lady was driven out of the church for putting that book in the bookstall, on the grounds that homosexuality doesn't need healing, it just needs acknowledging.

that's a significant change in our cultural attitude, isn't it? That it would be wrong to suggest that homosexual was something that needed healing.

needed. I think the sexuality of all of us needs a lot of healing anyway. But it's interesting to see the difference between that strong...

I mean, because that comes right out of... and that particular problem is going to run into problems in the United States of America, simply because the right to be a homosexual was not one of those self-evident rights which the fathers of the Constitution had in mind when they wrote the Constitution.

[25 : 22] So, you see how our mind has shaped with a sense of practical expediency our laws. But the plain law for Joseph was very clear that this woman to whom he was betrothed had in some way unknown to him, been unfaithful to him, and he was a righteous man, a just man.

That means he was a man of the law. And so he should, in accordance with the law, have her publicly humiliated and even so far as being put to death for her unfaithfulness.

I mean, that's the sort of concept of that had been modified considerably, I think, by the Jewish nation since the time of the writing of the Pentateuch.

But that was, in a sense, the background of it, as it is still, in a sense, the background of the Near Eastern society, where Mohammedanism and the unquestioned law of God obtains.

There was a long article in the Jerusalem Post that described Arab women living with Jewish men and the extreme danger they were in if this was ever discovered.

[27 : 07] And the fact that the least that would happen would be that they would be totally ostracized from their families, if not put to death, not by process of law, but just by the sheer violence of their families.

So, you see, it becomes a very significant factor when it says that Joseph was a just man. And how was this justice to be acknowledged in his life when he said, yes, I am a Jew and I believe in the law of God, what am I to do?

And he didn't, you know, how was the least he could do? And what the commentators think is meant when it says of him that he resolved to divorce her quietly, meant that he had to, in the presence of not less than two witnesses, announce this.

And, of course, the fact that she was pregnant and had been divorced by Joseph would then have to be dealt with by other people, but that he was prepared to be lenient with her, even though the full demands of the law, you know, if he had been indignant enough at the process, and presumably he wasn't unindignant about it, if he had demanded that happen.

And so, her husband Joseph, being a just man unwilling to put her to shame, did this. The intriguing thing about it is, I mean, the intriguing thing to my mind, and this is going off into a somewhat different sort of situation, but here you and I are, that we are in this position, and we suspect that we have on this side a just God, who is compelled to be just because he is God, and we have on this side loving people, who are compelled to bend the law because they like you and they think you're such a nice person.

[29 : 43] And so, people tend to build their relationships this way and to avoid this relationship. And, you see, this comes right into the heart of what the gospel is all about, because suddenly you find yourself in a position where your teachers disapprove of you, your society disapproves of you, you have failed economically, you have failed intellectually, and you suddenly find that this society that you thought was so loving is in the process of eliminating you altogether.

Because, in fact, we do that. We educate children up to the point where they fail, they can't go any further, and we accept people. But the real condemnation comes from this.

And the basic religious argument is, if people have turned me down, then surely God will only reinforce that decision.

Well, in fact, the New Testament turns this whole thing upside down and says, when people have condemned you outright, God has forgiven you through Jesus Christ, and he remains a just God.

And though your teachers condemn you and your family may condemn you and everybody else may condemn you, the good news is that God has forgiven you justly through the death of Christ on the cross.

[31 : 27] And your parents and teachers and family and society may take a long time catching up on that reality, but it is the reality of your life, love, which is the basis of your faith relationship to the God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him, no matter how unjust he might be, whoever believes in him will not perish, but will have everlasting life.

So you see Joseph in this kind of relationship to Mary, where he is a just man and doesn't know how to deal with her, but he deals as mercifully as he can under the circumstances.

Well, then you have, the story goes on that he resolved to divorce her quietly, but as he considered this, as he thought about it, you know, it's the lovely picture of Mary pondering all these things in her heart, and Joseph considering this, you know, because Mary, in last week's passage from Luke, once the angel had come and made the announcement to her, she thought about it.

What does it mean? And it's the kind of thing that probably we think about.

I mean, those kind of fundamental issues in life, we often think about in the semi-state of agony which overtakes us about three to four in the morning and you lie sleepless upon your bed pondering your ultimate destiny and conclude that you are a worthless person whose worthlessness is going to be richly rewarded.

[33 : 26] And you are going to find yourself submerged in the agony which you have always feared. And that's, I think, the point at which Mary considers these things in her heart and Joseph considers this, trying to understand what it means.

things. And I think it's a very strong argument for us to find time in our lives to stop and consider our circumstances.

Not to wrestle with them on our beds at night, so to speak, but to consciously and deliberately look at them in the broad light of day and in the understanding of God's eternal purpose.

And that I think we need to do that, and I think we need to help one another do that, because your testimony as to who you are is probably valueless.

I mean, it wouldn't be accepted in any court. It used to be, I'm not sure if it still is, that a wife's witness on her husband is not acceptable in court because they're too close.

[34 : 56] Certainly, your understanding of yourself shouldn't be accepted in court because you don't know yourself, and you need someone else to do that.

And so, you have to consider in the light of scripture, in the counsel of some godly counselor, your situation, to know who you are and where you are, and where the will of God comes into your life, and to recognize that reality as Joseph had to recognize that reality.

said, I'm not going to believe. And so, that's why I think it's important to look at that sentence and see that as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David.

Joseph was probably, by our standards, totally illiterate, you know, that he did not have a Bible by his bed.

He had the ritual of the temple to which he could attend. He had heard the reading from the Torah, read in the synagogue, in all probability.

[36 : 23] He had that. But in terms of trying to deal with this issue, God chose to speak to him in a dream.

And actually, if you read the gospel carefully, you will see that God habitually did that, being warned in a dream they did not return to Herod. The Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, no.

I think there's five or six different references in Matthew. to God speaking to Joseph in that way.

It has happened again, and I suppose under the impact of Jungian psychology, a lot of Christian people have started saying, yes, dreams are historically and scripturally a significant way in which God leads people and confirms certain things in those people.

I went out to lunch with a very intelligent man in this congregation, a very articulate and literate man in this congregation, who suffered a severe heart attack, and during that heart attack had some kind of dream, which has been the most enormous source of help to him ever since, in the assurance that it gave him of God's loving purpose towards him.

[37 : 58] love to him. And so I'm not advocating that you go taking dream powders before you go to bed at night or anything like that, but I'm sure that God uses the conscious and the unconscious.

He uses dreams and he uses all sorts of things in order to communicate to us. But the thing that he has done, and that I think we need to recognize that he's done, he has spoken to us by his word, and that we are responsible that our mind should be stored with the word of God, so that God can use that word in our hearts and our lives to guide and direct us.

That's why I think it's important in our life as a parish that we are constantly encountering the word of God with our minds, so that God can use that to direct us, even as he used that to direct Joseph.

Well, he says to Joseph, son of David, do not fear. Remember the same message to Mary. Do not fear. Don't be afraid. And fear is the opposite of faith.

Don't be afraid. Take Mary, your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son.

[39 : 28] You shall call his name Jesus because you are the Father, humanly speaking. He will save his people from their sins.

And I'll end there just by telling you that the Hebrew word apparently for Jesus and the Hebrew word for he will deliver his people from their sins is a kind of play on similar-sounding words with which the story of Joseph and coming to terms of Joseph and coming to terms with the birth of Jesus ends.

The one who is born, remember the naming of John was in accordance with what the angel dictated to Zechariah. The naming of Jesus is again in accordance with what the angel dictates.

Jesus, that you shall call his name Jesus because Jesus means he will save, that he is Savior.

Savior. So you begin with Christ, the anointed one of God, that is his office, and you give him the name Jesus because that is his ministry to save people from their sins.

[40 : 58] Amen. And we'll go on with the third and final one of the studies next week. Let me just pray. Help us, our God, to take these words, to consider them, and in considering them, to face the realities of our own lives, which we too must consider, the meaning and the direction and the purpose, and the reality of your sovereign will in our lives, and that we may be given the assurance that we are not to fear, but in faith to trust you in whatever circumstance we find ourselves, that your loving purpose will be fulfilled.

We ask this in your holy name. Amen.