

## Malcolm's Monday Musings : 23 December 2024

### (i) Scripture.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship him'.

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel".'

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him'.

After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

Matthew 2. 1-10 (*English Standard Version*)

### (ii) Food for thought.

**'A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches' (Prov. 22. 1).**

When entering the world, the Lord Jesus was to be called by three 'good' names:

(i) He was to be 'called the Son of God' (Luke 1. 35), because of what He had always been.

(ii) He was to be called 'Emmanuel' ('God with us', Matt. 1. 23), because of what He became.

(iii) He was to be 'called ... Jesus' (Matt. 1. 21; cf. Luke 1. 31) because of what He came to do.

'Isaac' (meaning, 'laughter') was named before his birth on account of something that his father had done; namely, 'laughed' (Gen. 17. 17, 19; 'Jesus' (meaning, 'the Lord is salvation') was named before His birth on account of something He was to do Himself; namely, 'to save' (Matt. 1. 21).

He who began 'the days of His flesh' (Heb. 5. 7) by the momentous stoop from the throne of God to the womb of a woman, would, therefore, need to end those 'days' by a further stoop to the fathomless depths of the suffering of the cross.

(Adapted from '*Day by Day through the New Testament*', Precious Seed Publications, page 8.)

***The incarnation of the Saviour brought greater joy to the angels than even the creation of the world.***

(i) 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth ... when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?' (Job 38. 4-7).

(ii) 'The angel said to them, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy" (Luke 2. 10; cf. 'when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy', Matt. 2. 10).

***'You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor' (2 Cor. 8. 9).***

'Think of the incarnation. The New Testament does not encourage us to puzzle our heads over the physical and psychological problems that it raises, but to worship God for the love that was shown in it. For it was a great act of condescension and self-humbling ... for our salvation.

'The key text in the New Testament for interpreting the incarnation is not, therefore, the bare statement in John 1. 14, "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us", but rather the more comprehensive statement of 2 Corinthians 8. 9, "you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich".

'Here is stated, not the **fact** of the incarnation only, but also its **meaning**; the taking of manhood by the Son is set before us in a way that shows us how we should set it before ourselves and ever view it —not simply as a marvel of nature, but rather as a wonder of grace'.

(J. I. Packer, '*The Christmas Spirit*', adapted from 'Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus: Experiencing the Peace and Promise of Christmas' edited by Nancy Guthrie.)

**The birth of Jesus: Luke 2. 1-20.**

'The newborn baby:

(i) His birth drew Mary and Joseph from Nazareth (Luke 2. 1–7).

(ii) His birth drew the angels from heaven (Luke 2. 8–14).

(iii) His birth drew the shepherds from the fields (Luke 2.15–20). "They went with haste"; Halford Luccock called this "the first Christmas rush".

(W. W. Wiersbe, 'The Wiersbe Bible Commentary', page 142 – slightly adapted.)

**'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God' (Luke 1. 35).**

'Many people will try to say that the conception of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit in the virgin Mary is not essential in the doctrine of the incarnation, since Jesus would have been the Son of God even if the virgin birth weren't true.

'The words of Gabriel do not agree. In answer to the question, how can a virgin conceive? he says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, **therefore** the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God".

'Jesus can be called "Son of God" and "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1. 32), precisely **because** He was "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary" ('The Apostles' Creed'). It is an unfathomable mystery that all the fullness of deity should dwell bodily in Jesus (Col. 2. 9). It is fitting (indeed necessary, I think) that the entrance gate to this mystery of incarnation should be the virgin birth'.

(J. Piper, 'Conceived by the Holy Spirit', in 'Come, Thou Long-expected Jesus', edited by N. Guthrie, pages 33-34.)

**'When Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb' (Luke 1. 41).**

'John the Baptist will be the last prophet, the final spokesman, of the old-covenant era. In his preaching, he will be the summing-up witness for the Old Testament.

'Everything about his preaching will point to one man, and one man alone. We know this from what the Gospels teach us of his public ministry. But here, even before he is born, his whole tiny being leaps for joy in the presence of the only-just-conceived Jesus.

'In this lovely moment, we learn that the whole of the Old Testament, as it were, jumps for joy in the presence of the One to whom it has pointed, for whom it has longed for all these centuries of waiting. All the longings of the Old Testament feed that joyful jump of John the Baptist!

(C. Ash, 'Repeat the Sounding Joy', page 61.)

**'And the angel said to them, "Fear not ... to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord ... you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger"' (Luke 2. 11-12).**

Towards the close of his Gospel, Luke speaks about another message delivered by an angel—at our Lord's tomb, following His glorious resurrection from the dead: 'He is risen; He is not here: behold the place where they laid Him'. Luke recorded, prior to that, that our Lord's body had been 'wrapped in a linen cloth, and laid in a tomb ... where no one had ever been laid' (Luke 23. 53).

On that latter occasion, the Saviour's lifeless body was 'wrapped' in linen and gently 'laid' by the loving hands of a Joseph (Joseph of Arimathea), while a Mary (Mary of Magdala) looked on (Mark 15. 43-47). But on the earlier occasion, His little body was 'wrapped' in linen and gently 'laid' by the loving hands of a Mary (His mother), while a Joseph (her husband) looked on (Luke 2. 7). Both at His birth and at His burial, our Lord occupied **a place which no other baby or man had ever occupied before**—in the one case, that of the 'womb' of Mary (Luke 1. 31, 34), and, in the other, the 'tomb' of Joseph (Luke 23. 53). In His birth, He was with the poor but, in His death, He was 'with the rich' (Isa. 53. 9).

Following His birth, our Lord was laid in a manger in Bethlehem as a consequence of a specific decree issued by a Roman Emperor—a decree issued by 'Caesar Augustus' (Luke 2. 1). Following His death, our Lord's body was laid in a tomb at Jerusalem as a consequence of a specific permission granted by a Roman governor—a permission granted by Pontius Pilate to Joseph of Arimathea (John 19. 38).

**The decree** was necessary to fulfil the prophecy of Micah, 'you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, little among the thousands of Judah, out of you shall come forth for me One who is to be ruler in Israel' (Micah 5. 2). **The permission** was necessary to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah, 'His grave was appointed with the wicked, but He was with the rich man in His death' (Isa. 53. 9).

Luke reports that 'a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census should be made'. Some five years earlier, the then Roman Governor of Asia, Paullus Fabius Maximus, wrote to the cities in his province in connection with the celebration of the birthday of Emperor Augustus:

'Since providence ... has bestowed him upon us ... as a **saviour** ... and since the birthday of the **god** (referring to Augustus) was for the world the beginning of glad tidings ('of the gospel', literally) of joy through him ... for that reason the Greeks of Asia have decided that New Year ... should begin on ... the birthday of Augustus'.

(Source: Adolf Deissmann, '*Light from the Ancient East*', pages 366-367).

After all, what more could any Roman citizen want? Even if he had not exactly brought 'goodwill towards men', Augustus had brought peace on earth. But, as the Greek philosopher, Epictetus (50-135 AD), later wrote:

'Caesar seems to have given us a great peace; how there are no longer wars nor battles nor bands of robbers nor of pirates ... But can he give us peace from ... passion ... from grief? ... or from envy? He cannot. Briefly, then, he cannot secure us from any of such things'.

(Source: '*The Teaching of Epictetus*', Book III, Chapter IX, Paragraph 2).

But the angel announces the humble birth of One born during the reign of Caesar Augustus, who both could and would do all those things which Augustus could not.

For, unknown to the Roman Governor of Asia and unknown to Emperor Augustus himself in far off Rome, there was One born that day, who, unlike Augustus, truly was both '**Saviour**' and '**God**' and whose birth heralded a very real 'gospel/glad tidings of joy'. For, not only did the Lord Jesus, in His lowly birth, bring God to men (hence His name, 'Emmanuel', Matt. 1. 23) but also, by His sacrificial death, He brought men to God (1 Pet. 3. 18).

(This lengthy 'Musing' comprises an extract from notes of a gospel message preached on Luke 2. 10-12.)

**'That it might be fulfilled' (Matt. 1. 22; 2. 15, 23).**

'History is but the unrolled scroll of prophecy'.

(J. A. Garfield, '*Letter to Professor Demmon, 16 December 1871*', quoted in 'The Life and Public Services of James A. Garfield. Twentieth President of the United States', page 426.)

#### **Random comments on the narratives of the incarnation:**

(i) How Jesus was born was a fulfilment of prophecy (Matt. 1. 18-23); where He was born was a fulfilment of prophecy (Matt. 2. 4-6).

(ii) For the first time in centuries, the glory of God returned to earth (Luke 2. 9; cf. Ezek. 11. 23).

(iii) On the five occasions recorded in Matthew 2 that 'the child' (Jesus) is mentioned with 'His mother' (Mary), 'the child' is always mentioned before 'His mother' (Matt. 2. 11, 13, 14, 20, 21).

(iv) King Herod lied to the 'wise men from the east' (Matt. 2. 8) and he murdered the 'male children in Bethlehem' (Matt. 2. 16). He was truly of his 'father the devil', who 'was a murderer from the beginning' and 'is a liar, and the father of it' (John 8. 44).

There is no question but that 'the great dragon ... that old serpent, called the Devil and Satan' (Rev. 12. 9; cf. Rev. 20. 2) stood behind Herod's foul plot to 'destroy' the young child, Jesus: 'the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to be delivered (Israel), to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations' (Rev. 12. 4).

(v) The Jewish chief priests and scribes were less than six miles from the (to them, known) birthplace of the Messiah ('the ruler who will shepherd' God's 'people Israel' (Matt. 2. 1, 6) but they made absolutely no effort to check out the wise men's story!

(vi) The wise men's 'search for the child' (Matt. 2. 8) proved unnecessary because of God's direction by means of the star (Matt. 2. 9).

Herod's 'search for the child' (Matt. 2. 13) proved unsuccessful because of God's protection by means of the warning given to Joseph by an angel of the Lord in a dream (Matt. 2. 13).

#### **Matthew chapters 1 to 4.**

'Matthew 1, with its genealogy and birth story, is dominated by personal names and answers the question, "Who is the Messiah?" 'In answering the first question, Jesus is shown to be Israel's long-awaited Davidic Messiah ('the Son of David'), the hope also of all the nations ('the son of Abraham'), and pre-eminently, the divine Son of God, whose conception is miraculous and whose birth is accompanied by heavenly portents.

'Matthew 2, with its story of the coming of the magi, the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem, the flight into Egypt, the return to Galilee and the settling in Nazareth, is dominated by place names and

answers the question, "Where is the Messiah from?" In answering the second question, Matthew shows Jesus to be, like King David, of the tribe of Judah and the town of Bethlehem.

'What is more, His story is told in such a way as to recapitulate the story of Moses and the people of Israel. The threat to the life of God's "son", Israel, and of the infant Moses at the hands of Pharaoh is played out again in the threat to the life of God's Son, the infant Jesus, at the hands of King Herod. And as "Moses the delivered" becomes the deliverer of Israel, so "Jesus the delivered" becomes the Saviour of Israel (and beyond) ...

'Of particular relevance to the story of Jesus is the testing of Israel. Just as Israel (God's "son") is tested for forty years in the wilderness, having first been 'baptized' in the waters of the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10. 2), so Jesus (God's "Son") is tested after forty days in the wilderness (Matt. 4. 1-11), having first been baptized in the Jordan (Matt. 3. 13-17). Once again, therefore, the story of Israel is being recapitulated in the story of Jesus ...

'Israel's filial loyalty to God in the wilderness was tested by (i) hunger (cf. Exod. 16. 4), (ii) physical dangers (cf. Numbers chapters 13-14) and (iii) the temptation to fall into idolatry (cf. the Golden Calf episode of Exod. 32). Now, Jesus' loyalty to God as God's Son is tested likewise'.

(S. C. Barton, 'The Gospel according to Matthew', in 'The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels', pages 124-126.)

### **The genealogies of Adam and of Jesus Christ.**

In order:

(i) Towards the beginning of the first book in the New Testament, we read, 'This is **the book of the generations of Adam**' (Gen. 5. 1), followed by a genealogy which stretches forward from Adam to the sons of Noah (Gen. 5. 2-32).

(ii) At the beginning of the first book in the New Testament, we read, '**The book of the generation of Jesus Christ**' (Matt. 1. 1), followed by a genealogy which stretches forward from Abraham to the Lord Jesus (Matt. 1. 2-16).

Perhaps the main distinguishing feature between the two genealogies is that the first (that of Adam) is punctuated with the nine-times-repeated refrain 'and he died', whereas the second (that of our Lord Jesus) makes no mention of death. Truly, 'in Adam all die ... in Christ all shall be made alive' (1 Cor. 15. 22).

### **'Adam, who was a type of Him who was to come' (Rom. 5. 14).**

'Adam is the only Old Testament character who is explicitly identified as a "type" of Christ in the New Testament. Adam's act had universal impact and prefigured Christ's act, which also had universal impact. The point of similarity between Adam and Christ is that what each did affected many others ...

'The rest of this chapter (Romans 5. 15-21) develops seven contrasts (one per verse) between Adam's act of sin and Christ's act of salvation. As Adam's act of sin resulted in inevitable death for all his descendants, so Christ's act of obedience resulted in inevitable life for all who believe in Him'.

(T. E. Constable, 'Expository Notes on the Bible', comment on Rom. 4. 15.)

### **'He saved others; He cannot save Himself'.**

'With regard to Mark's ordering of events, what purpose is served by the plentiful references to the impending death

of Jesus (Mark 8. 31; 9. 31; 10. 33-34) that seem to spoil the terrain of the gospel's early chapters, which otherwise evidence the growth of Jesus' popularity, the acclaim He attracts as a teacher, healer and wonder-worker? ...

'These images, popular acclaim and the shadow of heinous execution, raise early in the narrative the irony that surfaces explicitly in the voices of His tormenters at the end, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself" (Mark 15. 31)'.

(J. B. Green, 'The Gospel according to Mark', in 'The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels', page 140.)

### **'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' (1 Tim. 1. 15).**

Three sweet 'P's:

(i) The Person: 'Christ Jesus'.

(ii) The Place: 'the world'.

(iii) The Purpose: 'to save sinners'.

### **'The Prince of Peace' (Isa. 9. 6).**

'The chastisement of our peace' (the punishment necessary to secure or restore our peace with God) was upon (Isa. 53. 5) 'the Prince of Peace'.

**'Do not be anxious about tomorrow' (Matt. 6. 34).**

'Recently, I had the opportunity to visit the command centre aboard a ship. Toward the end of the tour, the captain asked if I would like to sit in his seat. As I sat down, I couldn't help but be amazed at all the skill and expertise necessary to safely run this vessel.

'My friends took several pictures of me looking like I was in control. But it was an illusion. I didn't have the knowledge or the experience to do anything helpful unless the captain instructed me. Can you imagine if I'd asked the captain, who was fully capable and fully equipped, to entrust his ship into my fully incapable hands? ... It may have felt good to sit at the controls for a few minutes, but if I wanted to return home safely, I had to trust the captain.

'In life, there are dangers only the ultimate Captain knows how to handle.

'Sometimes I catch myself mentally running into the future, where I fear there is impending doom, and then trying to make choices today to steer away from trouble. Sometimes this is wise. But while it's good to plan for the future (Rom. 15. 24-28), we don't want to obsess over the future. We can control our choices today, but we cannot fully control the outcomes of tomorrow'.

(L. TerKeurst, *'I Want to Trust You, but I Don't'*, page 142.)

**(iii) Go on, smile.**

[Omitted]