

PP1: Does Christmas cost too much?

Does Christmas Cost too Much?

Matt 2:13-18.

It's Christmas. The excitement is building. Christmas lights draw people out into the streets. Carollers are carolling. Have you found that special gift for loved ones on Christmas day? Perhaps Christmas is so special for you and your family that it is easy to be lost in the magic of it all. It is quite simple to not expect to be engaged with the story or hear from God. Does the "real," story of Christmas cost us too much to tell anymore? Do you expect to hear God speak to you this Christmas?

PP2: Magi

Today I invite us to be attentive to one of the post-birth narratives told by Matthew. We are going to let it guide us. Yes, Jesus is born in the little town of Bethlehem about 6 miles south of Jerusalem. Yes, the magi have come to worship this baby who is Christ the Lord! These Zoroastrian priests were skilled astrologers. Their star gazing had prompted a journey to follow a new twinkling star to Bethlehem. Yes they brought the special gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. I've got a story to tell about frankincense. In 1997 I visited Adis Abbaba and drank coffee after a meal at a classic Ethiopian restaurant. The coffee room was filled with the fragrance of burning frankincense. It was very pleasant! In Persia, frankincense was associated with temple worship.

PP3: What if a mullah etc.

In Matthew's story, Joseph is the person hearing from God. It must have been quite a shock to his Jewish sensibilities to be visited by the magi. What if a mullah from Mecca, with a full beard and white flowing dress, knocked on your door and brought a message from God? What if he wanted to worship Jesus with you? I'd love to see your face now. My mirror would crack.

Joseph is having a big week. Mary has given birth in a stable after a donkey trek from Nazareth. Luke tells us that shepherds have made an exuberant visit to see the "Saviour of the world," and now these strange foreigners, bearing exotic gifts have also interrupted the baby's sleep time. The magi had concerns about the intentions of the King of Israel, Herod the Great. Despite initially paying Herod their respects, these wise strangers went home by the back route. Perhaps Joseph was thinking of this as he went to sleep. The lights of Jerusalem flickered across the valley.

PP4: In the story of Israel etc.

Suddenly an angel appeared to him in a dream. In the story of Israel, God had spoken to one of Israel's greatest sons in a dream, another Joseph! Such visitations implied an important content to the message to be given. Joseph in Bethlehem was all ears. While we are attentive to Matthew's story, perhaps we too should open our ears and eyes to the things God wants to say to us in our time. As we watch and pray, the message may come from very surprising sources.

Joseph's dream messenger conveys an alarming and urgent message "Get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt." Why? This would very likely be the question flooding Joseph's mind. The angel continues "Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

PP5: Have you ever wondered why tinsel etc.

Have you ever wondered why tinsel is part of the Christmas tradition? Tinsel connects with a story that was told around the desperate journey that Joseph and his new family

made to Egypt. Despite the history of oppression under Pharaoh. Despite the great liberation of Israel by God and his servant Moses, Egypt had been a regular migration destination for the Jews in famine and war. Many Jews had settled in Egyptian cities with Alexandria being the most prominent. Without a doubt Joseph had relatives in Egypt and Bethlehem.

The story of tinsel goes like this. On their way, this refugee family found a cave to sleep overnight. They were frightened and exhausted. According to the legend related by William Barclay, it was very cold. The ground was white with hoar frost. A spider saw the little baby Jesus, and it wished it could do something to help Jesus stay warm. Options were limited but soon it was spinning a web across the cave entrance as if to simulate a curtain. Along the path there came a detachment of soldiers with Herod's mandate to kill all the boys under two years of age in and around Bethlehem. As they were about to enter the cave, their captain noticed the spider's web. The frost had formed on it to create an impressive barrier. "Look," he said, "The spider's web is unbroken. No one could be hiding in there. It's cold, so let's keep moving on." The soldiers passed by and the fear inside the cave subsided.

Can I suggest tinsel as an aide memoir this Christmas? An aide memoir that God wants to speak with you? Are you ready, perhaps at the cost of long held, preconceived ideas, to allow God the option of awkward and maybe even "alarming," messengers? Matthew takes us to the scriptures twice in his story. Both times, he takes a good dose of poetic license to create firm links between Jesus's story and Israel's story. Hosea was a Northern kingdom prophet and Jeremiah worked in Jerusalem. Matthew reworks the words of Jeremiah. "Rachel weeping for her children," is a metaphor for the great sadness of the Babylonian exile and the destructive force of its political power. Matthew applies this text to the horrors of the murder of innocent children at the hand of Herod. He has chosen this text not so much to explain its original context, but to tap into the Jewish memory of violence and murder, especially of children. Rachel becomes a saintly figure of memory. The memory of Egypt (remember the murder of Jewish boys under Pharaoh), of Babylon and now the apparent dashed hopes of Israel under the prefectorship of Rome, and its locally appointed despot, Herod. This is a gut-wrenching use of scripture. We hear the screams, we share the tears of Rachel, and undoubtedly the distraught families of Bethlehem. But there is a hidden "hope," in Matthew's choice of this scripture. I will hold this back a while.

Can I suggest one final way God speaks to us in this story? What do you know about Herod? Herod reigned as "The King of the Jews," from 40 to 4BC. He was half Jew, half Idumean, and received his authority from Mark Antony and Cleopatra. When Augustus challenged and defeated Mark Antony, Herod made his way to Rome and convinced the Senate he should continue to rule in Judea.

Matthew 4:15 links Galilee to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, but also to the Gentiles. Around 130BC Herod's forebears decided to forcibly bring Galilee under their authority. They forced all the people to become Jews. Mary was from Nazareth in Galilee and so Matthew, aware of the difficulties this posed for the house of Judah and those living in and around Jerusalem, tells us of Augustus's census. This census "guides," Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. It is very important for Matthew to tell the story of Jesus as the true Israelite, and a descendant of Israel's greatest king, David.

We recently have had a referendum in Australia. Can we hear God speak to us in the result? We live in a political world in much the same way as Jesus. Political decisions may not be desirable, but they contribute to the way God lets us know that “all things work together for good.”

PP6: We must acknowledge etc.

Up to this point, we must acknowledge that all options are on the table in the way God may choose to speak to his people. Sometimes the peace and predictability of our lives will be “thrown overboard,” as God reorientates us and speaks into our fragile plans.

People movements triggered by a dangerous political context or dire economic circumstances, have been a constant feature of world history. Think of our own history. Coming to our shores have been: Germans, Jews, Eastern Europeans, Rhodesians, South Africans, Chileans, Vietnamese, Southern Sudanese, Afghanis, Iranians, Karen, Syrians and more.

After the “spider web” not far from Bethlehem, there is another “story,” attached to the biblical narrative. The second involves a fellow called Dismas. Legend has it that he was the penitent thief who died alongside Jesus on the cross. In his early career, Dismas was a part of a robber gang who stood in the way of this terrified refugee family. One of the gang leaders wanted to simply kill the little family and take anything worthwhile for themselves. It was a simple, brutal robber strategy – a regular occurrence on the road between “Jerusalem and Jericho.” Something happened for Dismas when he looked at the baby in Mary’s arms. Holding his fellow rogues back, he spoke up and said: “O most blessed of children, if ever there comes a time for having mercy on me, then remember me, and forget not this hour.” A stray Roman would have had his life ended on the spot, but Dismas held firm and the family passed on to Egypt. It would be another 30 years of looting before Dismas was strung up on a cross by the Roman Justice System, but we are getting ahead of ourselves here.

PP7: When God sent etc.

When God sent his one and only son into the world, he sidestepped the Jerusalem Hilton and the world paparazzi. He was born among ordinary people in an animal shelter. As a baby or small boy, he shared the anxiety and peril of a refugee journey. Perhaps Jesus took his first steps in sight of the Nile. By the age of two, the state had tried to execute him. Maybe 30-40 other young boys died because of the jealous, political blood lust of Herod. Jesus and his family were like sheep among wolves. I have a question. What are we doing when we make Jesus into a “baby meek and mild?” There is something universal in the birth of every child. Perhaps the birth of Jesus allows us to reflect on the meaning of our own birth. Perhaps this is a birth to trigger the hope of a new generation. A generational heritage.

Think of the best gift you have ever received. Was it simply chance, that it was such a valuable gift? Could it have been that the person who gave the gift had put effort into their choice? Out of love, of hopeful expectation, did they stand in your shoes and imagine a gift just right for you?

PP8: When all is said & done etc.

When all is said and done, Christmas is a time of gift giving because God, God in the persons of Father, Son and Spirit, chose to enter the world made in love and lost in sin. Matthew has been keen to share some of the details of God’s careful planning. The first words of his gospel story want us to recognise that Jesus is born with

distinctive family connections. He is to be a son of David, Israel's greatest king, and the son of Abraham, Israel's greatest patriarch. God's planning has been very long in the making! A list of names tracing the family line follows and ends with these words in verse 17: "Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to Christ." Here the genealogy builds around the trauma of the exile of Israel to Babylon. The lessons, the experience of exile was part of God's preparation of love, for the birth of Jesus. Matthew adds the attention to detail, of fourteen generations in symmetry.

In disclosing that Mary is the mother-to-be of Jesus, Matthew knows that the potential of "shame and scandal," in the family could seriously discredit God's gift giving plans. So, he tells Joseph's story. The power of grace is already evident in Joseph's life. All that he knows of life and God's love point him to be honourable toward Mary. God's planning is intact and an angel is sent to tell Joseph that Mary has conceived through the Holy Spirit, and that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife. The angelic messenger is very encouraging for this faithful Jewish man. "She will give birth to a son," he hears. A bonding rush of love overcomes Joseph. He is able to hear the angel out. "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All the planning, getting all those details right, is because God in love desires to "save his people from their sins." Our response to this gift should be an excited sort of praise "Immanuel." God you are with us.

Here is a gift that has a 10 out of 10 wow factor. How does the loving gift giving of God play out in Matthew's story? History allows this storyteller to introduce a character who comes across as a mean Christmas scrooge. Herod has learnt to enjoy the spoils of his Judean kingship. He already had a terrible reputation for murdering his own wives and children to bolster his power and supposedly protect his own back. The sniff of "a saviour," triggered his murderous instincts once again. Maybe he justified his actions in killing the boys of Jerusalem, as shoring up the Roman Peace. Herod was not the sort of person who "gets," gift giving. He was an archetype "dominator." Would a meek and mild baby Jesus have got Herod fired up? I think not.

So we may have a problem. It seems to passage of time has allowed a reframe to Matthew's story. A meek and mild Jesus allows us to share the joy, to celebrate with gift giving and quietly push the reality of Jesus, God with us, onto the back burner.

Is God's gift giving in Jesus too costly for our Christmas sensibilities? To save his people from their sins, Jesus was to surrender to death on a Roman cross. This also was in the planning of the gift of his birth among us. Matthew will lead us to that part of the story later on.

Herod is like a wild, murderous heckler, who may just have scared us off the true storyline. Gentle pretence is something all sinners can live with. So I ask us all this morning: Is God's loving gift in Jesus, the gift we always wanted? This is a gift that keeps on giving. Our lives will be transformed. Our lives will be washed from our sins. In the retelling of this story, Jesus can be truly born in our hearts today. Anything less may be too costly, both for the church and for our Aussie neighbours.

Ramah is six miles north of Jerusalem on the way to Babylon. Bethlehem is on the way to Egypt. Matthew is very keen to develop strong links between Israel's story and the life of Jesus. He wants to develop the character of Jesus as the Good Shepherd of Israel. He is retelling Israel's story in the life of Jesus, and so the fragile, terror-stricken circumstances of Joseph's family is retold as Israel's story in verse 15: "And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: (Hosea 11:1) "Out of Egypt I have called my son"" Egypt was out of Herod's treacherous reach. As I have suggested, there were many Jewish diaspora communities to link in with there. Today, Australia is a country which is resisting fleeing refugees. Our politicians have stopped the boats. It may be however, a moment of national redemption for Germany. Living with the shame of the extermination of 6 million Jews at the hand of Hitler and his operatives, Germany today has embraced hundreds of thousands of Syrians, desperate to flee the bloody ISIS caliphate. It should be difficult for Christians to support a politics of active resistance to the needs and cries for help from desperate refugees, when Immanuel, God among us, was exposed to such a desperate experience.

I have already suggested some links to Egypt in our gospel story. In the ancient world, it was a country associated with sorcery and magic. All those fantastic movies that feature ghouls, crazed mummies, and powerful snakes bursting out of pyramids, pick up on this. In the early years of Christianity, some of the early church critics, tried to pin Jesus's power to heal and exorcise demons on what he learnt about the craft of magic in Egypt. This was a desperate argument as Jesus clearly returned to Israel as a child, as stories in both Matthew and Luke testify.

The return from Egypt calls out the memory of Moses the great leader of the people. The one to whom God gave the Law on Mt Sinai. One of the themes Matthew will develop is that Jesus is a new Moses. The five teaching discourses in this gospel remind us of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. The Sermon on the Mount is a powerful antidote to the vision of Herod's domination.

The themes of the heritage of Abraham, the kingship of David and the teaching of Moses, are woven together to appeal to Israel to see Jesus as the one who will save them from their sins. The violence of Herod, captured in Rachel's tears is also part of a literary theme that leads scholars to see the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 67AD as a tragedy that further highlights the crucifixion of Jesus. This Jesus calls us to be peacemakers in our violent world.

Another dream is recorded in verse 19, and now Joseph leads his family home only to settle back in Nazareth. Nazareth was not on any of the maps preserved from this time. It was a quiet place, out of the political limelight. Herod's son, Archelaus, wasn't to be trusted.

I promised to return to Jeremiah's words. In quoting these words, Matthew has helicoptered them out of Jeremiah's prophecy. In Chapter 31, he is about comforting the people with the hope of redemption. God will bring them back from Babylon and the despair of exile is his word of hope. So Jeremiah 31:15-17 take the words of despair, Rachel's weeping; and declares a full-bodied hope. Let us read the words together: "This is what the Lord says: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they

are no more.’ This is what the Lord says: ‘Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded,’ declares the Lord. ‘They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your descendants,’ declares the Lord. ‘Your children will return to their own land.’”

Jeremiah was resisted by the politicians of his day, and eventually, as the Babylonians tightened the noose on Jerusalem, he was whisked down to Egypt with some officials. Unlike Jesus, we don’t hear of his return, but Jeremiah’s message of hope is truly full-bodied in Jesus. Where this prophet falls short, Jesus will take us to the end, the full stretch of love.

Australians will invest billions of dollars and considerable emotional energy in celebrating Christmas this year. Post-Christmas sales will feed our addiction to false hopes. Santa has become the seller of false hope from coca cola to guns. A Christmas tree in Singapore decorated with hundreds of Mickey Mouse figures is a little more honest. Will all this effort protect us from despair? Is the cost of Christmas simply too much for all of us? Jeremiah’s message of hope remains plain for all who will remain attentive like the magi. God’s messengers to us come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, in comfortable and uncomfortable ways. Have you heard God speak to you in hope this silly season?

What sort of effort have you put into buying and wrapping gifts for family and friends this Christmas? The God of Jeremiah’s hope has executed a plan for salvation in full-bodied integrity in his son, the baby Jesus. Jesus is the biggest and best surprise in anyone’s life. A free offer has been on the table for nearly 2000 years. As Aussies, we know “life wasn’t meant to be easy.” Jesus never lived on the red carpet, but was born as an ordinary person in the little town of Bethlehem, and with his family, fled the fury of the paranoid despot, Herod, the King of the Jews. From the margins, he calls: “Come all who are weary and heavy laden.” All who have lost hope! Take the journey back home with Jesus. Follow him into Galilee of the Gentiles. Discover He is the way, the truth and the life itself, in his death on a cross in Jerusalem and his resurrection from the grave. Matthew has a magnificent gospel story to tell to the ends of the earth, and the end of the age. Immanuel!

Join with me to embrace all the possibilities of 2018!

Paul Mercer

WGH 17/12/17