

6th December 2020 10 am The Old Testament hope of a Messiah to come

Service led by Lindsey Attwood, Reading by Geoff Whiteman, Talk by Val Whiteman, Lindsey also interviews Lis Cox asking her what Christmas means to her (before the talk)
This transcript is only of the reading and the talk

Reading: Matthew 2:1-18 [NIVUK 1984]

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 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.”

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 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 “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

6 ‘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 shepherd my people Israel.’”

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 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.”

9 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. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

16 When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. 17 Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

18 “A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Talk

[Lindsey Attwood:]

Ah, thank you Geoff. That's great. So I just want to pray for Val now, as she brings God's word this morning.

So, Father God, thank You so much for Val, thank You for all the work she's been doing, listening to You, and trying to hear what You're saying through this and where You were in the Old Testament, and I just pray for now, that You'd bless her, Lord, and bless her words. And I pray that You'd bless us too. And that we would really see You in this, and know You more and more. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

[Val Whiteman:]

Amen. Thank you, Lindsey.

So, Advent's normally a time when we remember the coming King. And usually we've lit the candle that reminds us that John the Baptist is the forerunner. But we're going to look a little bit more widely today. Do we think that Jesus came as a complete shock to the Jewish race? Is the Old Testament over and done with, and we can get rid of it by the time Jesus comes? Well, no, and I think, no.

I'm afraid there'll be lots of references today, for which I apologise. Hamish usually puts the transcripts online. So if you need to, can you look there for details or take notes as we go through. Because I had such fun doing this (I know, I should get out more) but see how many references you can find, because I found it so enriching in my understanding of hopes from the Old Testament.

There are different types of Old Testament hopes. One is called **typology**, another **direct covenant promises** from God, and a third **prophecies** about a coming King.

And the point is this – and please take this away when I've overwhelmed you with references – that God's salvation plan was from the beginning. It wasn't just an afterthought, it wasn't in key texts, but it's in a whole sweep of the Old Testament narrative, which is why I'm going to be starting with typology. This indeed itself is just breathtaking. And it's also a bit of a problem for me because I could probably be talking all day. So, I'm afraid I'm going to have to be selective, so if I don't use your favourite reference, then use it for yourself and meditate on it.

So, to start with, **typology**. You know that Coventry is going to be a city of culture next year, and I am afraid I do find it a little hard to get my head around that, I'm sorry. But in the Middle Ages, it really was a city of culture, because kings, nobles, the whole government almost visited Coventry every June for the performance of the Mystery plays, which were famous all over the country. The name of Mystery plays is also Ludus Coventriae: the game or the play of Coventry. Now, Coventry Mysteries were slightly unusual in that they were a bit like Oberammergau: they were the life of Christ only. If you went a little bit further north to York or to Chester, but especially to York, there were, and there still are, the more usual Mystery plays, and they start with Creation, which is performed at dawn in mid June on Corpus Christi day, and they end in dusk, with the Last Judgement. So the Old Testament, how are they going to manage that? Because there's quite a lot in there. So what they do is they select plays, so that they represent types of Christ or typology, they're forerunners of Christ from the Old Testament, either in behaviour or in action.

So the first type of Christ, we have the Creation, and then we have the fall of man. And Adam is the first man who failed. Jesus is the second Adam who succeeds. And you can look up 1 Corinthians 15 verse 45, where Paul spells it out for us: Jesus is our second, and better, Adam.

And then there's Noah and the flood. And that's slightly different in the way it does typology, because Noah represents Jesus, who takes people on the ark, which is like the Church. And we are safe inside the ark of the Church, from the storms of life. So Noah also represents the salvation work of Jesus.

And then, probably most familiarly, there's Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac, where Abraham gives his only son freely because God asks him to.

And the link there between Jesus, God, Isaac and Abraham is fairly obvious, isn't it, that Abraham was willing to give a sacrifice because God asked him to, and a much greater sacrifice happened where God gave His only Son, again, freely for us. In the sacrifice of Abraham and Isaac there was no sacrifice of Isaac. A ram was put in his place. So it's like the substitution, that, well, our sins are carried by Jesus and He substitutes for us.

These are the types of Christ from the Mystery plays. There are an awful lot more in the Old Testament if you'd like to think about them. They all prefigure some aspect of who Jesus is. Now you'll notice one big omission, which is from the Mystery plays and from this, my talk, which is Exodus and we're going to touch on that story a little later on.

So that's typology. Then we move on to the **covenant promises** that God made with His people. Again, there are many, but let's look at the one from the Isaac story. And all these covenants right from the beginning of Genesis point to a new beginning in Jesus, and this is just amazing. Here is the promise for Abraham. It's for Abraham, it's for the Israelites, but also if you notice, it's for all of us too. And it says, [in Genesis 22]

15 The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time 16 and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, 18 and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

"All nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me:" you might like to see if I'm right. And check out the other other covenants. There's one in Genesis 18, an earlier promise to Abraham, for example, but there's Isaac's covenant too in Genesis 26.

And there's Jacob's blessing to Judah, in Genesis 49, so it's not simply that God promises to Abraham, and then forgets it, as it were, He renews this covenant time and time again. And each time He renews the covenant, He talks about *all* nations being blessed through Israel. So how are they going to be blessed? We're going to be blessed through the coming of Jesus. So typology, the way in which the Bible story resonates with the Jesus story, the way in which the covenant promises, bring us this hope for all nations, not just for Israel.

And finally, the **direct prophecies**. Now prophecies in the Old Testament quite often are statements about where Israel is before God, and what action God will take, so they can be read simply as for being for people of their own time. But also, a lot of them resonate for later peoples too, so they can refer to more than one thing. You have to use discernment therefore with biblical prophecies. And that's the interesting way previous generations have been much more sophisticated in the way they read the Old Testament, and its relationship with the new than we are, I think.

So, I want to look at the prophecies slightly differently, so I'm not simply doing lists of texts. So what I want to do is to look at the birth story that Geoff read for us a while ago. It's so familiar to everybody, but you might like to have your Bibles open at Matthew 1 and 2. What I could have done was to go

through the genealogies which everybody skips at the beginning of Matthew. And again, that's something you might like to do in the run-up to Christmas. The people that are involved, as it were, in Jesus's coming, are most of them familiar, some of them not, some of them men, some of them women, some of them famous, some of them never mentioned anywhere else, and yet they're all part of the Jesus story. Again, an amazing thing, and really, really encouraging for us, that we might feel that were a very tiny, tiny part of the Jesus story. But nevertheless, we are, as it were, in the genealogy.

Only Matthew and Luke tell birth stories, you remember, and they focus on slightly different things, and interestingly, in different ways. Matthew's story, because famously Matthew writes for Jewish believers, is rich in links to the Old Testament, and he does use the Old Testament slightly differently from the way that we might. So again, if you look up a good commentary on this chapter or these chapters (I used Michael Greene's commentary in *The Bible Speaks Today* series which is really useful). So if we look at Matthew chapter 1, at the end, that Geoff didn't read, Matthew talks of Immanuel, Jesus coming: that's going to be His name, Immanuel. And we all know very famously that Immanuel means 'God with us.' And there is the reference to Isaiah 7, verse 14, where we can see God's promise to His own chosen people, even when they exasperated Him. God with us, isn't that amazing, that that is what Jesus is for us. And when you unpack that, when you look at the richness of it: He came to us as a baby. He entrusted himself, God with us, as a vulnerable creature, as well as being the God with us: He stays with us all the days of our life.

Now the Romans interestingly called Jewish people 'atheists', because they had no image of God in their temples. And that's a really interesting difference between what you might call the made-up gods, and the God who is the Jewish God, who is the creator God, because the Jewish God comes to His people, not vice-versa. We are in His image, not He in ours. And it's very important to remember this because we do tend to drift towards the pagan expectation that we can manipulate God. So, if you think about the Roman gods, there's a creator god Zeus, Jupiter, but he's very, very different from the Jewish God, you can look at what he looks like, and he tends to fling thunderbolts about and behave in a very bad manner, immorally, when it suits him. Well, he's made-up, whereas the Jewish God is not.

So in the beginning of Matthew, Matthew reminds us, and through Matthew God reminds us, that He comes to us in salvation. And not only does He come to us through the covenant where He talks with people in the Old Testament, and He says to them, "I make a covenant with you." This time He comes to us as a human being, a part of the Godhead, entrusted to a human family, and that is such an amazing concept which we take for granted when we celebrate it every Christmas. You can practically do Matthew 2 off by heart, can't you. Well, I challenge you, just read it and think about it. This baby was to be called Jesus, which means 'God saves'. And this was a common name because of Joshua, which is a variant of it, the successor to Moses who bought the children of Israel into the promised land after the years in the wilderness. But in Jesus' case, it was absolutely true: God saves. He was God, and He saved. And you'll just have spotted, I hope, another instance where the children of Israel in history prefigure the life of Jesus, through Joshua.

So in chapter two, where we started reading, you can see that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. It's odd, I think, that Herod has to ask his wise men in his court, what the wise men are talking about when they say they've come to find a king, "Where's he going to be born?" Herod says. And so he gets the prophecy from Micah chapter 5 verse 2, which says,

2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,

whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”

3 Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when she who is in labour bears a son,
and the rest of his brothers return
to join the Israelites.

4 He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.

So, there are prophecies about a coming King which obviously Micah wouldn't have understood, and Bethlehem: why Bethlehem? But Jesus fulfils that prophecy in His birth, and He fulfils a later bit: He will stand and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord, when He grows up. Matthew, writing to Jewish Christians, stresses that right from the beginning, Scripture was fulfilled: Gentiles, like the Magi, were coming to worship, in contrast with King Herod, who did the opposite of worship.

We can now look at the servant songs in Isaiah. And you can see there that there's a richness of the whole of... I could have spent the whole morning on Isaiah, because it's just so wonderful that there are songs where Isaiah has an image of what God is going to be like when He comes as saviour. And I think that's amazing. Isaiah 42:6, 49:6 and 52:10 as well. There's just so much richness from Isaiah.

So, after the Magi have left, Joseph is commanded to flee from Herod to Egypt, and in Hosea 11 verse 1 it says, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." So Jesus' family flee to Egypt, and commentators think that what Matthew is doing here is stressing what happened this week of the Jesus story. He is the new, the better Israel. And like Israel, His story includes the Exodus. He is exiled because a tyrannical ruler kills baby boys, just as Pharaoh tried to kill the Israelite babies. When He grows up and is tempted, He goes into the wilderness, but unlike the children in Israel He's obedient to God, and He spends 40 days not 40 years there. So He really is the new Adam, the new Israel. He is what God intended us all to be.

If you look beyond the birth stories you can look at Isaiah 53, which is so rich and understanding what the new man, Jesus, is: the new Israel. He's ordinary. We don't notice Him. And that's something I think, when you look at pictures of Jesus, and you look at the way in which the church rightly venerates what Jesus has done for us, you don't see Him as Isaiah saw Him, the real human being, the one that you wouldn't actually notice if He walked down the street. He has no beauty that we should observe Him. We don't understand Him, because He bears our sins for us. And we let Him do this. He really is both man and God, not just God playing at humanity. And I think again that's a whole new book of things to think about: the pain of the crucifixion is real. The cost to Him is huge. And when we must not underplay that. It's an appalling sacrifice, but it's one we rejoice at because it brings us salvation.

You note what the prophecies say: He will die for many, He will be buried with the rich and with transgressors. He will carry the sins of all of us, and we won't understand it. Jewish people think that this refers to the nation of Israel, and it well might, but the fit with Jesus and Isaiah 53 is just extraordinary.

I'd love to go on to the Luke story of Jesus's coming, because he too knows that Jesus is fulfilling Scripture in His birth, but I know I've kept on saying you might like to do this – I get told off because I was a teacher and I keep on setting people homework in my sermons, and I'm really sorry, but I'm unashamedly doing it today, because I think for us coming into Advent, this is the thing that we ought to be doing to get ready for the coming King, and to realise who He is. So, I'm going to kind-of leave you with Luke with just a few thoughts. He's writing for largely a Gentile audience so his use of Scripture there is... He does use direct allusions to prophecies, he knows his Old Testament very, very well, but I suspect that he actually makes his readers work a little bit harder about how words are used in the Old Testament than perhaps Matthew does. So I'm going to suggest just one to start you off. Think about he writes about the shepherds, and the angels coming to the shepherds, and what 'shepherd' might mean to Israel. We know that the shepherds on the hillside were outcasts, not very well thought of. We know that they were probably looking after the temple flock, with all the richness that that would imply about the sacrificial lamb of Passover. But also if you just Google, or go into commentaries and look at what 'shepherd' meant to Israel, God was the Shepherd: we've already seen it in one of the prophecies that I've read, but also the leaders of the people were supposed to be shepherds, and often they weren't very good. So, again, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the one who fulfils Psalm 23, and all the other references to shepherds and shepherdiness.

So I'm going to end with a last prophecy. Imagine, shut your eyes and imagine that you were on the hillside with the shepherds, and you see the light from the sky, and immediately you think about Isaiah chapter 60:

- 1 'Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.
- 2 See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the LORD rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
- 3 Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

So let's sum up what I've said, because it's been quite a lot.

- God's plan was from the beginning, for us.
- **All** nations were to be blessed in the Messiah, right from the start.
- Jesus's birth and subsequent life was foretold.
- So Alleluia!
- **And now**, check out what I've said: don't trust me, trust the word of the Lord, do your own exploration, especially Luke.

Amen.

I want to give a short time for reflection now, because this is the 'So what?' moment. I love looking at words and how they work. It was my job. But, if that's all I do with the Bible it's not much good. Why is it so important that God made it clear to us that He has a salvation plan right from the beginning? You'll have your own answers. For me it's because I can be sure that God still has a plan, that, though I can't see many things, I can be absolutely sure that God is still there, still in control. That Immanuel, God with us, has never left. The great sweep of history, as well as the minutiae of my daily life, is known to God, directed ultimately by Him. So what I'd like to do now is for all of us to spend a couple of minutes reflecting on your own understanding of what Immanuel might mean for you.

Father God, thank You that You have a plan for us, that You know us and that You are with us in these difficult times. Help us to understand Your love for us, and Your nearness to us every day. Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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