

Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus (Matthew 2.13-23)

Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus is a mystery wrapped in a melodrama. Violent – exotic – unpredictable – we are so familiar with it that it's easy to forget how extraordinary it is. An angel appears out of the blue to an ordinary man and announces that his fiancée is carrying God's child. The baby is born and a caravan of very grand astronomers arrives from somewhere in the East, to worship the baby and bring him expensive gifts. Then tragedy strikes: King Herod hears of the baby, and in a fit of paranoia orders a massacre of the children of Bethlehem, while Joseph and his family flee to Egypt.

It's as complicated as an opera plot, with just as many loose ends. (Have you ever wondered what happened to all that gold and frankincense and myrrh? Or why no-one ever seems to recognize the adult Jesus as the Virgin's Son, or as that child the magi visited? Or why it matters that he came out of Egypt?) It's complicated because Matthew has a lot of things to say, and to express them all he has woven at least three stories into one.

The first story is for Matthew's Jewish-Christian listeners, and is about the Messiah. It tells how Jesus was descended from King David, as many Jews believed the Messiah would be, and how his birth fulfils prophecies about the Messiah from some of the great prophets of Israel – Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hosea and Micah. It shows angels guiding his parents through his birth as they had guided his ancestors, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

Matthew's second story is for his gentile-Christian listeners, and it tells of a Great King in the gentile mould. Jesus was the son of a human mother and a divine father – like Alexander the Great or the Emperor Augustus. When he was born, astronomers spotted a new star rising in the sky, as they always did when a great king was born or died. When Herod discovered that a new King of Israel had been born, he tried to kill Jesus, and Jesus only escaped by going into hiding – just like the Persian King Cyrus had had to do, or Cypselus the Greek tyrant. Gentiles would have recognized many parallels between the birth of Jesus and their own great men.

The third story is very different, and equally surprising to Jews and gentiles. It tells of an illegitimate child, born in a very ordinary household, who becomes a refugee, fleeing his country in danger of his life. Who even when it's safe to return, can't go home, but has to settle in another part of Israel. (Luke says Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth and went to Bethlehem for the census, but Matthew implies that they lived in Bethlehem, and says that when they came back from Egypt they moved to Nazareth for the first time.)

The intertwining of these stories makes Matthew's Jesus what he is – Galilean, Son of David, Messiah, Son of God. They are all important and challenging in different ways. But, paradoxically, the most challenging of all is perhaps today's story of Jesus the refugee from an ordinary family, which on the face of it is the simplest and least colourful.

Jesus will always be ordinary. His ministry will be almost entirely among ordinary Jews. And to many of them, he will always be the carpenter's son. Eventually he'll be crucified like a slave or a common criminal.

And Jesus will always be a migrant, a stranger. 'Foxes have holes,' he will say, 'and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' He will leave Galilee as a

young man, and never live there again. He will often find himself unwelcome in the towns where he preaches and heals, and have to move on. He will be driven periodically by the Spirit into the desert. At least once he will leave Israel completely, for Tyre and Sidon. He will make different places his base – Capernaum, Bethphage – but he will never be able to settle or finish his work in any one community.

He will always be in danger from authority. Not because he courts power, or makes trouble: at the beginning of his ministry, the devil will tempt him with political power, and he'll refuse it. It won't be his idea for crowds to shout 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' when he enters Jerusalem. He will tell the Pharisees to pay to Caesar what is due to Caesar. He will even impress the Roman governor. But in the end religious and political leaders will see him as a threat; and neither the Jewish nor the Roman authorities will feel safe with him alive. The things he says and people's reactions to him are too powerful.

And all his life and after, Jesus will bring danger and even death to people close to him. At Bethlehem it was the children, whose only link with him was that they were about the same age. Later, Jesus will warn his followers, 'I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves... Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me... you will be hated by all because of my name.' The history of the early Church shows how right he was.

So today's story poses a profound challenge to Matthew and his listeners. Jesus's life is marked not only by power and hope and glory, but by conflict and failure and death. He and the people he touches are terribly vulnerable. His very existence has consequences beyond his control, some of which are disastrous.

Matthew is grappling here with something which has always been a special problem for Jews, as he was. When God sends the Messiah, Jews believed, there would be no mistaking him. He would appear in a blaze of glory – take over Israel – change the world – and nothing would ever be the same again. But Matthew finds himself believing in a Messiah who was poor and obscure and vulnerable – who never intended to take over Israel – who called people to change, but never forced them to – who transformed some lives but left others untouched – who had hardly begun his work when he was taken for an ordinary trouble maker and killed.

It's an absurdity; a paradox; a mystery. And yet he does believe it – passionately and profoundly, in every moment of his transformed life. The rest of his gospel is Matthew's exploration of how this mystery can be – that such fragility can be the means by which God hopes to change the world. That God sent his only son, the Messiah, to live in poverty and die on a cross.

As we travel through this year in Matthew's company, this is the mystery we ponder too.

Amen
(Sandford-on-Thames)

The heart of this is perhaps that contact with Jesus is always dangerous – has unpredictable consequences, for good or ill. God introduces something to the world which can't be closely controlled. Like other elements of creation – natural forces, life forms...

The Hebrews lesson says that it's only because Jesus has been tested that he knows what it's like for us.

Matthew 2.13-23

I never know quite what to do with the stories of Jesus's birth. It's one thing to talk about the Incarnation itself – how the love of God reaches out to us in Christ. How humanity, led by Mary and Joseph, responds. How Jesus as a baby draws us all to him. How somehow we receive and hold God's gift, and between us go on holding it.

But it's another thing to talk about the details of the birth stories themselves. And if one is harder than another, then for me it's Matthew. Why does Matthew tell the story he does? Complete with angelic visions to Joseph, magi following a star from the East, King Herod killing the children of Bethlehem (and if he had done that, it would surely have got into the rest of the history books), the family decamping to Egypt and coming back years later to settle in Nazareth. Granted that Matthew wanted to say that Jesus was special right from the beginning – why does he tell this story?

It's really at least three stories in one. For a start, there is a story about the Messiah of Israel, told through genealogy and prophecy. In Matthew's day, many Jews were expecting a Messiah, and many of them were expecting him to be a king from the house of David. So since Matthew believes that Jesus is the Messiah, he tells us that his father Joseph is descended from David – and even better, from Abraham too.

One of the things Matthew and Luke have in common is the idea that Jesus was conceived out of wedlock – and people have wondered whether the story of the Holy Spirit coming to Mary was Christians' answer to some rumour that there was something irregular about Jesus's background. Both writers make the best of it by citing the messianic prophecy of Isaiah, 'A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.'

Matthew goes further than Luke, though, and his story is littered with prophecies. There had been hundreds of prophecies about the future of Israel, so he had plenty to choose from, and I suspect that it is mostly not the individual prophecies that matter here, so much as the prophets themselves. After all, some of the prophecies – like the one about Rachel weeping – don't really add anything to the story, and others – like the one about God's son being called out of Egypt – are never referred to again.

I suspect that Matthew, wanting to make the point that Jesus was the Messiah foretold by the prophets, used whatever prophecies fitted his story best. But it is notable that his prophecies come from the perhaps the greatest and most influential prophets of Israelite hope and salvation – Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hosea and Micah – and from the times of Abraham and David – just the texts that people would look to, to confirm that the promised Messiah had come.

The second story Matthew tells, interwoven with the first, is not for a Jewish so much as a Gentile audience. Writing when Gentiles were already becoming Christians, he wanted to show that Jesus was a king in a way Gentiles would understand. So his birth story is full of ideas borrowed from Gentile stories of the birth of kings.

The idea that the king is really the son of a God, is widespread in the Greek and Roman worlds. Alexander the Great, for instance, was widely regarded as the son of Zeus, who visited his mother, possibly in the form of a snake. And it was typical for astrologers – magoi – to spot a new star rising in the firmament when a new king was born or came to power. It is also a common story that while one man is king, a child is born who will supplant his line.

The present king tries to have the future one destroyed, as Herod does Jesus, but the future king escapes by going into hiding, as Jesus did. Later, he returns and eventually takes power. It happened to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, for instance – who was well known and admired by the Jews for freeing them from slavery in Babylon in 539 BC. And who, by coincidence, was the original subject of some of Isaiah's prophecies, which were later applied to Jesus.

Matthew's third story is very different. The story of an illegitimate child, who is born in an ordinary household. Who becomes a refugee soon after his birth, fleeing the country in danger of his life. Who narrowly escapes a massacre in which perhaps dozens of other innocent children die. Who even when it is safe to go back to his country, can't go home, but has to settle in another part of Israel. (Luke says Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth and went to Bethlehem for the census, but Matthew implies that they lived in Bethlehem, and says that when they came back from Egypt they moved to Nazareth for the first time.)

Which, if any of these three intertwined stories has any basis in fact, we have no idea. But perhaps the most remarkable thing about them all, is how unimportant they seem to be in the rest of the story of Jesus. All that gold, frankincense and myrrh that the magi were supposed to have brought – what happened to them? All those angels who guide Joseph in the first two chapters – they appear briefly at the end of the temptations and at the resurrection, but never otherwise. No-one ever recognizes Jesus in later life as the child the magi visited, or for whom the innocents were killed, or as the subject of those birth prophecies. It never seems to matter again that Jesus spent time in Egypt.

It seems that Matthew is trying to convey to the people he expects to hear and read his gospel, how exceptional Jesus was, in language that he thinks they will understand. He is the Messiah – a king as great as any Emperor – a Son of God.

And strangely, Matthew is perhaps less successful in capturing the importance of Jesus in these chapters than anywhere else. Was anyone ever brought to repentance, to prayer, to love of God and their neighbour by these stories? I doubt it. It is in other places that we see the power of Jesus shine out irresistibly from Matthew's pages. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.' 'You have heard it said, Love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...' 'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or wear. Consider the lilies of the field...' 'Ask, and it will be given to you...' 'Take heart; your sins are forgiven.' 'Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' 'Let the little children come to me... for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs.' 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.'

Paradoxically, in a way, what Matthew shows us in his birth story is how little the conventional trappings of power matter – divine messengers and rising stars and distinguished visitors and expensive gifts. What matters is what is the baby himself, and the man he will grow up to be.