Doing and Saying – a Christian Pilgrimage

Matthew Chapter Two – Week 49

The birth of the Saviour

Day 336. Midrash

Did you notice what Matthew did in 1:22-23? "This all happened so that what was spoken by the Lord would be fulfilled …" and then he quotes from the Old Testament (in this case, Isaiah 7:14). Matthew is using a time-honoured Jewish interpretive act known as *Midrash*. Midrash is when you take the words of the bible and use them to make sense of the present day, of your context. Midrash responds to contemporary problems and happenings, making connection from them to the biblical text. *This may or may not be in line with the original intent of the text.* Remember how we talked about how, in relation to the bible, God inspired:

1.) the authors,
2.) the receptive community,
3.) the collectors, copiers, translators, the editors, and finally,
4.) God inspires the reader.

Here is yet another case – God inspires an author based on his or her reading of the text, applied against their experience – and then *that* gets written down and goes through the subsequent four steps. Midrash is a time-honoured interpretive technique, though it can lead to arguments such as, "therefore, this means 'X'" … "how can you say that? It doesn't mean 'X' at all!"

An important point is that you can use Midrash to help you make sense of your own life and what you are experiencing. As you read the bible (Lectio Divina is a very good format for this), see how what you are reading may apply against your life, and may even guide you as to what would please God in your situation – this is another way in which the Word of God really is a living word.

As you read through the bible, what do you find in common with your own life? It could be the despair, anger, chagrin, puzzlement in some of the psalms, or the joy and gratitude also in some of them. It could be experiences of the people in the Old Testament, in the New, or of Jesus Himself. What do you find speaking to you, that would be life-giving for yourself and possibly for others as well?

Share your thoughts with those you trust.

Day 337: The relevance of Isaiah 7:14

It is thought that "Immanuel" and "Maher Shalal Hash Baz" (Isaiah 8:3) may be the same person – if that is true, then the prophecy given in Isaiah 7:14 was fulfilled during the lifetime of King Ahaz of Israel. Ahaz assumed the throne of Judah at the age of 20 or 25. Sometime later his kingdom was invaded by Pekah, king of Israel, and Rezin, king of Syria, to try and force him into an alliance with them against the powerful state of Assyria. The prophet Isaiah went to Ahaz and said, "God says, 'don't worry about Israel and Syria – their invasion won't be successful.'" But Ahaz did worry, and he made a treaty with the Assyrians for them to come and help – Israel and Syria were defeated by the Assyrians, and Judah became a vassal state of Assyria.

In Joseph's dream, the Angel is saying "this prophecy also applies to the situation of Jesus' birth." Matthew wasn't writing this in a vacuum or on a whim – he was carefully applying Old Testament prophecy and how it can be expanded to new contexts, building upon how it indeed had been expanded in the Old Testament (as Isaiah himself expanded the prophecy of 7:14 in Isaiah 9:6-7, the famous "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" verses). He was now using this to judge the circumstances of what was happening around him. He was grappling with a new understanding of the universe, and trying to fit that into the framework that he knew.

Matthew is telling us that, through the Angel's dream conversation with Joseph declaring that the baby is from the Holy Spirit (i.e., from God), and quoting that passage, God is declaring, "I am now directly intervening in human history, in person." You can approach this book and think, "Oh neat! Matthew is writing a fantasy!" Or, you can approach this book and think, "Wow. My awe and wonder at God have just grown beyond bounds."

Matthew will build his case, but here he is announcing the second most momentous thing that has ever happened: God Himself, Incarnate.

If that's second, what's the most momentous thing that has ever happened? Humanity, sanctified – we'll get to that.

God has intervened many times in human history, through conversations with people (such as Isaiah) or direct actions (such as the burning bush with Moses). Here we are introduced to an extremely radical concept: the Son of God, walking amongst us. As we progress through the book of Matthew, we will see more clearly what C.S. Lewis meant when he wrote, *"You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool ... or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us."*

What do you agree with in the book of Matthew? What do you disagree with, or have difficulties with? Does it make sense so far?

Share your thoughts with your fellow explorers.

Day 338: The Astrologers

"Some high-level dignitaries from a strong and powerful country came to the dictator and asked, "Where's the one who is born to be your ruler? He's here now, and we'd like to present ourselves before Him." How do you think Hitler, or Genghis Khan, or any dictator would feel if that happened to them? Matthew relates that "Herod was alarmed" (Matthew 2:3) and asked his religious leaders what was said in prophecy (we seem to be focusing a lot on prophecy, which, by the way, is the Telling Forth of God's Word (*not* "predicting the future" – it could be about the future, the present, or even the past)). And they say, "Bethlehem," quoting the prophet Micah. Incidentally (or not), Bethlehem was also believed to be the birthplace of King David many years prior.

Herod asks the astrologers when the sign of his birth (a star in the heavens) had first appeared, sends them to Bethlehem, where they go and give him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (which is why the tradition of 'three wise men' arose: three gifts, therefore three men. In reality, there could have been two, or two hundred, we don't know). These were very expensive gifts, related to royalty, priesthood (and worship), and death. Frankincense was part of the incense burned before the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle when the Israelites wandered the wilderness. Myrrh was used for romantic perfume, for anointing the Tabernacle, and for anointing the dead when wrapping the body.

With the visit of the Wise Men, Matthew is stating "someone very important has just been born, someone to whom the hopes of the nation are bound – and the world is getting alarmed already." Have you noticed that when change is happening, even very good change, there is almost always push back? What good changes in your life have you pushed back against?

Share with your fellow explorers.

Day 339: To Egypt again, and back, again

Joseph had another dream message (between him and the Wise Men, there is a lot of dreaming going on here), in which he is warned Herod will try to kill his son – so he should go to Egypt. Again, Matthew does some midrash, quoting Hosea 1:1: "When Israel was a young man, I loved him like a son, and I summoned my son out of Egypt. Notice how Matthew changes the context from referring to the nation Israel, to referring to a single individual: Jesus.

Then follows one of the more tragic stories in the bible: the murder of the innocents. Herod orders the death of all children of two years old and younger around the town of Bethlehem. He was ruthless and would do anything to protect his throne and lineage (this example of ruthlessness is very common amongst dictators throughout history, unfortunately). Matthew recounts, 'Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud wailing, Rachel weeping for her children, and she did not want to be comforted, because they were gone."'

Matthew is again using midrash against this quotation from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah prophesied that though there was bitter grief in Ramah (in Jeremiah's time, due to the invasion of the Babylonians), the people would return from their captivity (Jeremiah 31:16-17) (as they did, 70 years later). Matthew is saying "this prophecy applied then to that context, and it applies again, to this context." Ramah was a small town very near Bethlehem.

Herod dies, Joseph dreams again, and returns. Matthew sees the flight and return of Jesus' family as a very real echo of the Israelites flight to Egypt and return to the promised land – and the prophecy (Hosea 1:1) is fulfilled, but this time Matthew sees it as reinforcing that Jesus is **the** Son – not the people of Israel.

God spoke to Jeremiah, and through Jeremiah, spoke to the Israelites of Jeremiah's time, and to Matthew, 600 years later. In the same way, as you read the bible, God can speak to you, about your life and how you are living it. As you read your bible today, open yourself up to the leading of the Holy Spirit and hear what God is trying to tell you.

Record your observations.

Day 340: The Nazarene.

He (Joseph) came to a town called Nazareth and lived there. Then what had been spoken by the prophets was fulfilled, that Jesus would be called a Nazarene.

Except none of the prophets talk about the anointed one of God being a Nazarene.

Sorry, say that again?

There is no prophecy in the Old Testament about Nazareth, or about the Anointed Messiah being a Nazarene.

What then, is Matthew trying to tell us?

What a great question! ☺ We have a few clues.

a.) The word "Nazarene" is from the Greek Nazōraios **Root:** Ναζωραῖος Nazarite = "one separated" 1) an inhabitant of Nazareth 2) a title given to Jesus in the NT 3) a name given to Christians by the Jews,

b.) Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah use the term "branch" as a metaphor to refer to the new king that God would raise up from the line of David (Isa 4:2, 11:1, Jer 23:5, Zech 3:8, 6:12). In Hebrew, the word "branch" is netzer, written by three consonantal letters: NZR. Note that the town NaZaReth contains the same three primary letters (plus an ending often attached to nouns). In the Aramaic form of Nazareth, (Aramaic was the common language spoken by most Israelites after the exile; some have suggested that the entire book of Matthew was originally written in Aramaic rather than Greek), it comes very close in sound to the Hebrew word for "branch." "Branch" would be "NZR", "Nazareth" would be "NZRth" (https://www.crivoice.org/branch.html) (vowels were not recorded early on).

c.) Galilee was considered the "wrong side of the tracks", and Nazareth was "the wrong side of Galilee" – it was an unsavory and suspicious place; as Nathan said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). There are references to how the Messiah would be humble, lowly, and looked down upon, amongst them Isaiah 53:2-12. Perhaps Matthew was linking the town of Nazareth through its reputation, in effect saying, "Jesus the Despised."

d.) A Nazarite is a person who makes a special vow to God to be set apart for a specific period of time or for life. Samson, from the book of Judges, and the prophet Samuel were both Nazarites. A Nazarite was a holy person. Some scholars believe that the Nazirite vow may have been seen as a metaphor for the Messiah's consecration to God. The idea is that the Messiah would be a Nazirite, dedicating themselves to God and setting themselves apart from the rest of humanity.

And so…?

Perhaps Matthew was trying to say one or all of the above – in essence, Jesus was one set apart, one who would be despised and treated poorly, and one who is the branch of Jesse (i.e., part of David's eternal kingdom) – all of which was spoken by (and through) the prophets – and this,

Mathew states, was confirmed by him living in Nazareth, literally, being a "Nazarene." God loves to speak through simile, metaphor, allusion, parable – and Matthew recognized this.

Sometimes we need to see beyond what our senses reveal to us, even to beyond what we can comprehend. The Savior of Mankind had just arrived – and Matthew was doing everything he could do to let us know that. Write down how you encountered Jesus, the Savior of Mankind – and what it meant for your life.

Share your experience with your fellow explorers.

Day 341: John the Baptist

Now we skip about 30 years and come to the ministry of John the Baptist. His central message (and, as we shall read, the early message of Jesus), is ""Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Let's spend some time on this.

"Repent" means "Change your ways" or "Change your path." What is John telling us to do?

Change how we live our lives.

Yes. Why?

Because otherwise we won't get into the kingdom of heaven?

Most likely that's his reasoning, yes! Now, why would this be strange?

The only thing I can think of would be that we are already supposed to get into the kingdom of heaven?

Yes. As children of Abraham, John's audience would have considered themselves God's chosen ones for His kingdom. Why would then they need to repent?

Because inheritance was not a guarantee?

Exactly. John was following in a long line of prophets who warned the Israelites to change their ways – not just to adopt specific practices, but to fundamentally change how they live their lives.

How should you change *your* life to more closely live how God wants you to, as a member of His kingdom?

Share your thoughts with your fellow Explorers in Christ.

Day 342: Rest

Rest, receive nourishment, feed both body and soul. Reflect on the past week and care for your needs (body and spirit). Pray. Dedicate this day to God. Worship! In the evening get together with a group you trust and share what you would like to from the previous week – good points, hard points, what you've learned, what you've struggled with, etc. Decide again if you wish to continue journeying together or want to stop.

Know that God loves you. Celebrate, Rejoice, Give thanks, talk and walk with God.