

I don't tend to read many biographies or autobiographies but here are a few opening lines from some I have on my shelves. "Hello my name is Matthew and I am eight years old. I was born on 31st December 1976 in St Mary's hospital. I live in Pudsey Yorkshire" (Matthew Hoggard)
 "Arthur Wesley, as his family name was then spelt, was born probably on May 1st 1769 in his parents house in Dublin." (Arthur Wellesley – Duke of Wellington)

The next one doesn't even mention birth it simply says "On 30th November 1628 her son, John was baptised followed 15 months later by a daughter whom they baptised Margaret. When John was nearly five years old his brother William was born and the family was complete." (John Bunyan)

Compare those with the words here in Matt 1:18, "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about..." None of the biographies I have ever read apart from Matthew's gospel say that. They all presume we know how births come about. Births are normal but this one wasn't and Matthew's words make that clear. This was an unusual birth.

It reminds me of the story I read once of a little boy at school who was set a project to investigate his family tree. So he asked his mother, 'Mummy, how did I get here?' Now Mum didn't want to go into the birds and the bees at that point so she said, 'The stork brought you.' 'Oh.' he said. He then found his Dad and asked, 'Daddy, how did you get here?' he too didn't want to talk about the details and said, 'The stork brought me.' 'Really?' said the little boy. Then, since granny happened to be staying, he went and asked her, as well: 'Granny, how did you get here?' And granny said, 'The stork.' So next day he went off to school and began writing his project: 'There has not been a normal birth in our family for three generations.'

Well as we approach Christmas we look at Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus.

If you just follow the passage through with me it begins with Mary who it says was "pledged to be married to Joseph or engaged. This was a formal agreement lasting about a year before the husband took his bride into his own home. It came out that she was pregnant. Joseph was "a righteous man" or just in other words he was careful in observing the law. But while he could have taken her to court and publicly humiliated her he was also a man of mercy and had decided to simply quietly end the relationship.

However at that point an angel, a messenger from God appeared. The angel came with his "I shall say this only once" message explaining the circumstances of the conception that the child was conceived from the Holy Spirit and gave Joseph the name for this special child.

So Joseph obeyed God and took Mary as his wife.

Great so we know the story but then we knew the story anyway.

However I want for a few minutes to look behind the story and see its inner meaning and why Matthew has seen fit to record it here.

It's when we do this I realise what a shallow person I am. I mean I see a film and I see what's happening and then someone will say, "did you see the symbolism in that man turning away from his father?" I think no I didn't. Or I see a play or read a book and then hear others talk about it and realise I just seen what I've seen or read what I've read but got no deeper.

The same can be true of the Bible we can simply read the words at face value but there is much more underneath as we just open it up a bit.

Today while we read of Mary and Joseph I think the main person in this passage is God.

I want us to think about the passage in three ways, God's plan, God's son and God's saviour.

1. God's plan

Matthew shows us the plan of God from v22&23. The prophet Isaiah of blessed memory from the summer P factor series brought God's word to the people saying that a virgin would give birth to a son and they would call him Immanuel – God with us.

Here we see that the birth of Jesus was not a sudden impulse on the part of God. The best gifts are not sudden impulse gifts. Let me say that again, the best gifts are not sudden impulse gifts. Guys have you got that?

The birth of Jesus was according to God's plan worked out by God's sovereign power in God's time as we see from Galatians 4:4, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law". God had a plan, even we might say a cunning plan.

It was prepared before the time and brought to fruition by God. That plan involved fallible human beings and so we see here God had to act to prevent Joseph putting a spanner in the works and getting rid of Mary. After all those of us who were here last Sunday morning at 9am saw that Jesus' ancestry to David and beyond was through Joseph. He could have messed it all up only God wasn't going to let that happen.

We see the plan of God and the plan was that his son should be born.

2. God's Son

V20 contain the words that point us to the uniqueness of Jesus, "what is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit".

Here we come to the fact of the Virgin birth. I recognise that this is for some a contentious area. In a poll carried out in 2008 only 34% of people agreed with the statement that Jesus was born of a virgin. Another poll of 140 Church of England (Anglican) clergy found that 27% do not believe in the virgin birth. The pollsters reported: "...one Hampshire vicar was typical: 'There was nothing special about his birth or his childhood - it was his adult life that was extraordinary....I have a very traditional bishop and this is one of those topics I do not go public on. I need to keep the job I have got.'

Larry King, the CNN talk show host, was once asked who he would most want to interview if he could choose anyone from all of history. He said, 'Jesus Christ.' The questioner said, 'And what would you like to ask Him?' King replied, "I would like to ask Him if He was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me."

That is as I see it very shrewd because this event does define history because it defines who Jesus is and his uniqueness as the Son of God.

Can we believe Jesus was born of a virgin? Yes we can based firstly upon the veracity of those who recorded the life of Jesus. What we have here in Matthew is original testimony. Of course Matthew himself wasn't there when Jesus was born but these words came to him from those who were. They could only have come from Joseph or Mary herself. We are dealing here with a historical record of the life of Jesus based upon the testimony of those involved.

Secondly because of who God is. "What is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" that is the child was conceived by God. Without God many things

are impossible but with God nothing is impossible not even a virgin giving birth. He who can create life out of nothing can create life in the womb of a woman. Karl Barth, the theologian wrote, "The man Jesus is not the true Son of God because he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. On the contrary because he is the true Son of God and because this is an inconceivable mystery intended to be acknowledged as such, therefore he is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary...the mystery does not rest on the miracle. The miracle rests on the mystery." That is, in simple language, the birth is not seen as evidence that Jesus is God rather because he is God this is the way his birth happened. Can we believe it? We can indeed because our God is the God of miracles.

Matthew is making it clear to us that this child is the unique Son of God.

3. God's saviour

It might seem a bit pedantic for God to have told Joseph what name the child was to be given. But of course then names had meaning. I know today that when people give their children odd names they try and explain what the names mean but then the name was meant to describe the hopes of the parents for the child or how they viewed the child. Here God made it clear in the given name the nature and task of his Son, "you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." The "he" there is emphatic so it could be read he and no other will save. God was making it clear to Joseph and through him that his son was being born to be the saviour of the world. As one writer put it, "Jesus was not so much the man born to be King as the man born to be Saviour".

And God made it clear what kind of Saviour he was to be. Yes the people were crying out for a liberator, someone who would save them from the Romans but that was not the saviour he would be. In every age we look for Saviours. Today if someone could come up with a way to get the country out of the economic mess we are in then they would be hailed and feted as the saviour. If someone could come up with a drug to cure AIDS or cancer they would be a saviour. The person who could provide a means of holding back the aging process would be a saviour.

However Jesus came to save people from their sins. Why was that? Because that was what God knew humanity needed above all.

As someone once wrote, "If our greatest need had been information . . . God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology . . . God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money . . . God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure . . . God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was forgiveness . . . So God sent us a Saviour."

God sent his only Son as the Saviour in order to fulfil the plan of God set before the world began and mentioned in that prophecy from Isaiah, "'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel!"—which means, "God with us." But that isn't right is it because he was called Jesus and never called Immanuel!

However, Jesus came and died for our sin and so he removed the barrier which separates us from God so that we might become children of God and know his presence always. This has always been God's plan. As we share this Christmas together it is still God's plan that people should know his love and be brought to him through the Saviour who is the son of God.

Here, as many of us know is the heart of Christmas that God was born as man and born to die on a cross to fulfil the plan of God that stretches across eternity.

I was praying with another minister earlier in the week and they said in their prayer something like "may we catch the magic of Christmas in the right way if you know what I mean." I think I did know what they meant and said a hearty amen and do again today because if we who are God's children can't catch the wonder of what God did in Bethlehem then how will others and if we can't catch the wonder then what are we celebrating?

Let me take you in your mind to that place in Bethlehem with all its squalor just a place to house the animals and a mother giving birth to a baby but a baby who is unique, who is God, born as man, born of a virgin, born in humility born for us and for our salvation. God became man for you and for me. That is the magic if you want to use that word of Christmas. May it cause our hearts to rejoice as we think about it over the next few days.