

‘When Joseph awoke’

A sermon by Andrew Knowles at St George’s Church Kendal, on Sunday 18 December 2016

Advent 4

Readings: *Isaiah 7:10-17; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25*

***‘When Joseph awoke from sleep,
he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him’***

Matthew 1:24

Following our experiences with Storm Desmond, I’m taking no chances. My new diary is from Lytham St Anne’s Lifeboat Station. It has useful information in the case of emergencies:

High Water times at Morecambe Bay

And RNLI stations with *inshore* lifeboats

These are the things we need to know!

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I wonder whether we think of the Bible as like a diary – to be referred to in case of emergency?

Do we really need to know that the prophet Isaiah promised a sceptical king Ahaz ‘a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall name him Emmanuel’; or that the Son of God was ‘descended from King David, according to the flesh’; or that ‘the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place’ in such-and-such a way, as Matthew records in his gospel - today’s reading?

We turn to these pages because they are key components – and compelling evidence – of what we call the Salvation Story: worked by God through people and places, cultures and crises from the beginning of time.

Jesus was born ‘*to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet*’ says Matthew (Matthew 1:22). It was to be expected – and it *was* expected - which is why these apparently random episodes were found exciting; were preserved and treasured. They had one big banner headline written right across them: ‘HERE GOD IS AT WORK!’

The words of the prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz of Judah (c744-728BC) were fulfilled nearly 800 years after they were first uttered! Of course, they had meaning nearer the time: a child was born and by the time he was of age, Judah's old enemies had vanished.

Isaiah steps forward to assure King and People that God knows their situation, that God is powerful and God cares; and whether the King wants it or not, there is to be a sign of 'God at Work':

'A young woman shall bear a son and name him Immanuel: 'God is with us'' (Isaiah 7:14)

That promise lived on in Jewish memory at another level – a higher level of significance: that one day God would send a Messiah, an 'anointed' One, consecrated, devoted and set apart, for the triumph of God's people: One who would establish God's kingdom in the world.

This was 'prophecy' – something unique to Israel. The Hebrew Scriptures – which we call the Old Testament – are the notebook – the memory book - of all such presages and premonitions of 'God at Work'.

As we say sometimes in the Communion service: 'This is *our* story'! - a story that found its focus and fulfilment in the Birth of Jesus and a story which continues to this day - because, through Jesus, 'God is with us'.

'Emmanuel' means 'God is with us' and Jesus' parting promise to his followers was: 'I AM - *with you* - always – to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20).

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I don't suppose that when Joseph awoke after hearing an angel speak to him in a dream, that he yawned and stretched and said to himself, 'Goodness, this is the fulfilment of Isaiah Chapter 7 verse 14!' It's the gospel writer who added that particular insight.

What's wonderful about Joseph is that, *when* he awoke he *responded*:

'He did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him'

He acted courageously, justly and kindly. He took the scandalously pregnant Mary to be his wife and stood by her, honoured her and protected her until her child was born.

'This is His story' – and 'This is *our* story'. Through Jesus, God's own Son, grace and truth entered our world in Person. Humility, inclusive love, and sacrificial service were revealed at the very heart of God. This is how God made himself known most completely, not only as Creator or Law-giver, but as a self-expending Saviour. This is how we know ourselves rescued, healed, forgiven and restored. And, most of all, loved: loved by God.

It's our story! And it hasn't finished.

It's not only Joseph who needed to wake up to what God was doing and work to further God's purpose. It's us as well. The Advent season is a time to awake from spiritual sleep. The human race is destroying the environment God entrusted to us. We are unable, more than ever, to live at peace with one another. The world's unstable financial systems and compromised, vulnerable communications are putting us at enormous risk. And much that we once took for granted – the knowledge of right and wrong, of good and evil – of what makes for healthy living - is 'disintegrating'. We are experiencing 'dis-integrity'.

The Bible has a lot to say about this: 'Information for Use in Emergencies':

*'In the last days distressing times will come' Paul writes to Timothy:
'People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money,
boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents,
ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable,
slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good,

treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit,
lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,
holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power.'*

2 Timothy 3.1-5

You can't take a single one of those phrases without being able to illustrate it aptly and accurately from the pages of today's news. They are 'the signs of the times' -all clearly spelt out in Scripture.

Like Joseph, we need to wake up to what God is saying, and, in the present crisis of our world, to be people of *integrity*. The Bible's language for that is of purity and holiness – and people also of active faith, persevering prayer and willing service.

The Bible doesn't provide information for emergencies so that we can be paralysed by fearful, but so that we can look up in hope; so that we can live purposefully, faithfully and together through testing times.

Because God has confided in us what's going on and we know that, from all that has proved true so far, our God is going to save, heal, reconcile and restore all things. In Christ, he makes all things new.

Traditionally this is Mary's day – on the fourth Sunday of Advent we light a candle on the Advent ring for the Virgin Mary. But, for once, let's hear it for Joseph: who 'awoke from sleep' and 'did all that the angel of the Lord had commanded him'