

Followers of the Way

Messiah's Birth – Hope Fulfilled

Steve Campbell 27-11-22

Matthew 1:18-25

Hope has been described as a psychological necessity (New Bible Dictionary p.489). Those who lose hope, who are hopeless, may lose the will to live. Ancient Greeks did not consider hope as a virtue, but simply a temporary illusion, that's why Paul could say of them that they were without hope and without God (Eph 2:12).

We all hope – whether the child who hopes they will receive everything on Santa's list, or the adult who hopes the hospital test results will prove negative. Human hope, however, is based more on wishful thinking than anything concrete.

Christian hope is different, it is a sure and certain hope because it comes from our faith in God – *'Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see'* (Heb 11:1). God's people in the Old Testament were offered hope. Even while in exile from their homeland God spoke to them through the prophet Jeremiah – *'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'* (Jeremiah 29:11).

The ultimate source of that hope had been declared by one of Jeremiah's predecessors, the prophet Isaiah, over one hundred years before – *'For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'* (Isaiah 9:6 ASV).

The hope of the coming Messiah is proclaimed throughout the Old Testament, even as far back as Gen 3:15 where the LORD said to the serpent – *'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.'*

Yet despite the many promises given by God that the Messiah, his anointed one, was coming, they had a long wait until he appeared. In Spanish the verb *esperar* means 'to wait'. Many times I've sat in a cafe and said to the waiter, 'Espero para mi mujer.' (I'm waiting for my wife) And no doubt Irene-Maria has had to say it many times about me! And yet the same verb means, 'to hope.' It is similar in Hebrew.

Isaiah 40:31 begins -

'But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength' (KJV)

'but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.' (NIV)

It's not a case of either/or but of both/and. Alec Motyer commenting on this verse writes, *'Hope (with its biblical dimension of certainty) is one facet of ['tiqvah'], which also includes 'waiting' (patience) and 'resting' (trusting). (The Prophecy of Isaiah, p.308).*

God's people had to wait patiently in hope for the promised Messiah to appear, but when the time had fully come God sent his Son, born of a woman (Gal 4:4). But of course it was no ordinary birth: it was miraculous, it was divine, because after all this was the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin.

Mary herself was party to this, as the angel Gabriel had visited her and pronounced that she would conceive and give birth to a son. And her older cousin Elizabeth was in on it, because Mary stayed three months with her and she knew she was bearing this miracle child. But what about Joseph? He was in the dark about the whole matter, so how did he feel?

Joseph is the quiet man of the Nativity, not one word from his lips is recorded. He could be thought of as peripheral to the whole story, surplus to requirements. But that is wrong. Joseph has an important role to play, both in a legal sense and a personal way.

The Gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, not surprising as this is the most Jewish of the Gospels. It traces the Messiah's ancestry through King David back to Abraham. The promise to Abraham that all peoples would be blessed through him is fulfilled in Jesus. And, as the son of David, he is the true King of the Jews, the one who would sit on David's throne forever.

However, this is the genealogy of Joseph, who had nothing to do with the birth of Jesus, so what's the point of recording it? The purpose is to show that Jesus had a legal right to the title Messiah, because Joseph was willing to adopt him as his son. Joseph was a humble, working man, a carpenter from the town of Nazareth, from where it was thought nothing good could come – how wrong can you be! Mary, his betrothed, was a young virgin somewhere between the ages of 12-16, which was quite normal in those days. We don't know Joseph's age, though some traditions believe he was an older widower, who already had a family. This is to try and preserve the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, but the Bible shows no evidence of this and v.25 precludes it. So it is safer to assume that Joseph was a young man, preparing a place for his young bride and excitedly awaiting their wedding day.

Can you imagine how he felt, then, when he discovered Mary was pregnant? Betrayed, hurt, ashamed? His hopes had been shattered. He knew the child wasn't his – though others might point an accusing finger at him. He believed Mary had an affair; she wasn't the girl he thought she was.

After Jesus came to prominence, Jews spread the story that his mother had been raped by a Roman soldier and his birth was the result. This false claim seems to have been made even when Jesus was alive. In John 8:39-41, Jesus is arguing with some Jews:

'Abraham is our father,' they answered.

'If you were Abraham's children,' said Jesus, 'then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father.' (meaning the devil)

'We are not illegitimate children,' they protested. 'The only Father we have is God himself.'

The implication is they believed Jesus to be illegitimate!

The Law was clearly strict on adultery, and the punishment set out in Deuteronomy 22 was death by stoning. Even though Joseph had a legal right to claim this punishment, he chose not to exercise his right. Just like the patriarch he was named after, the one of the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat fame, Joseph was a righteous man. Not wanting to shame Mary, or wish her dead, he decided on a quiet divorce, despite the hurt and betrayal he felt. Joseph obviously still loved his betrothed.

So that's what he had determined to do, and then slept on it. Now his name was not the only thing he had in common with Jacob's eleventh son, he also was a dreamer, and an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying –

Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

It is interesting that the heavenly messenger addresses Joseph as 'son of David', underlining the Davidic line of the Messiah. Then he reassures Joseph, revealing at last the truth about Mary's pregnancy; it was neither rape nor infidelity, but part of God's greater plan, the fulfilment of Isaiah 7:14 – 'The virgin will conceive...'

Joseph's hope had been restored, and the hope of all humanity could now come into the world, born as a baby with two loving parents to nurture him. The angel also revealed to Joseph the name he was to give to the child – Jesus; and explained why – 'because he will save his people from their sins' (v.21). Biblical names have special meanings, and Jesus is the name above all names. It means the LORD (Yahweh) saves.

Joseph acted on the angel's instructions, took Mary home as his wife – no doubt without the big celebrations they were both hoping for – and then when the baby was born named him Jesus, as the angel had said.

The act of naming the child indicates Joseph's willingness to accept him officially as his own, similar to the LORD saying to Israel, 'I have called you by name, you are mine' (Isa 43:1). Thus Jesus is given status as a son of David, a necessity for the Messiah.

So Jesus the Messiah is born, the hope of Israel in all the promises of God fulfilled in this one child. His name shows forth his purpose for coming, 'he will save his people from their sins' (v.21). Just who are his people? Only the Jews? No, Matthew's Gospel ends with the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations.

All people are his and all need salvation from their sins. So the birth of the Messiah is the beginning of hope for all humanity. His death and resurrection has made it possible for all to be forgiven. We can all be saved from our sins through faith in Jesus.

However, as we look at our own lives and the world around us, we are still assailed by sin, both personally and corporately. As one Christmas carol puts it:

'Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled

Two thousand years of wrong...'

How then can we say we have been saved from our sins? Salvation is a process, not a one-off event. It involves three tenses – past, present and future. Through repentance/faith, we have been saved from the penalty of sin. Jesus paid the cost on the cross. By the Holy Spirit working in us, we are daily being saved from the power of sin ... take up your cross daily. But one day, when Jesus Christ returns in all his glory, we will be saved from the very presence of sin!

This is our ultimate hope ... and so we say: Maranatha – even so, come Lord Jesus.