

LENT
for
EVERYONE

MATTHEW

YEAR A

A Daily Devotional

N. T.
WRIGHT

WJK WESTMINSTER
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ASH WEDNESDAY

Matthew 1—2; focused on 1.18–25

¹⁸This was how the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place. His mother, Mary, was engaged to Joseph; but before they came together she turned out to be pregnant – by the holy spirit.

¹⁹Joseph, her husband-to-be, was an upright man. He didn't want to make a public example of her. So he decided to set the marriage aside privately. ²⁰But, while he was considering this, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream.

'Joseph, son of David,' the angel said, 'Don't be afraid to get married to Mary. The child she is carrying is from the holy spirit. ²¹She is going to have a son. You must give him the name Jesus; he is the one who will save his people from their sins.'

²²All this happened so that what the Lord said through the prophet might be fulfilled: ²³'Look: the virgin is pregnant, and will have a son, and they shall give him the name Emmanuel,' – which means, in translation, 'God with us.'

²⁴When Joseph woke up from his sleep he did what the Lord's angel had told him to. He married his wife, ²⁵but he didn't have sexual relations with her until after the birth of her son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

We know very, very little about Joseph. Some legends make him an old man who died while Jesus was growing up, but we don't know that for sure. We know he worked in the building trade, including what we call carpentry. We know he could trace his ancestry back to the ancient royal house of David and Solomon (many first-century Jews knew their family history as well as many today know the story of their favourite soap opera, or the fortunes of their football team). And we know that Joseph faced a unique personal and moral challenge, and came through it with integrity and humility. Joseph, in this passage, provides a sharply personal angle for us to approach Matthew's gospel.

Think how it was for him. Marriage beckons, quite likely arranged by the two families but none the less an exciting

prospect. A home. Children. A new status in the community – in a small town where everyone knows everyone else and where, without television, everybody else’s life is part of a complex daily soap opera.

And then the shock. Mary has news for him, news to send a chill down the spine of any prospective husband. How can he possibly believe her strange story? What will people say? So he plans, with a heavy heart, to call the whole thing off.

Then, the dream. Mary’s story is true. What’s more, she and her child are caught up, not just in a personal challenge, but in a much older, stranger purpose. God’s purpose. God’s rescue operation, long expected and at last coming true. The child to be born will be ‘Emmanuel’, God-with-us. God with us to save us; hence the name ‘Jesus’, the same word as ‘Joshua’, the great leader who brought the people of Israel across the Jordan into the promised land. The name means ‘Yahweh saves’. God with us; God to the rescue.

Whenever God does something new, he involves people – often unlikely people, frequently surprised and alarmed people. He asks them to trust him in a new way, to put aside their natural reactions, to listen humbly for a fresh word and to act on it without knowing exactly how it’s going to work out. That’s what he’s asking all of us to do this Lent. Reading the Bible without knowing in advance what God is going to say takes humility. Like Joseph, we may have to put our initial reactions on hold and be prepared to hear new words, to think new thoughts, and to live them out. We all come with our own questions, our own sorrows and frustrations, our own longings. God will deal with them in his own way, but he will do so as part of his own much larger and deeper purposes. Who knows what might happen, this year, if even a few of us were prepared to listen to God’s word in scripture in a new way, to share the humility of Joseph, and to find ourselves caught up in God’s rescue operation?

Today

Speak to us, Father, in a new way as we read your word. Help us to hear your voice and follow where you lead.

THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Matthew 3; focused on 3.1–12

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared. He was preaching in the Judaeae wilderness.

²‘Repent!’ he was saying. ‘The kingdom of heaven is coming!’

³John, you see, is the person spoken of by Isaiah the prophet, when he said,

The voice of someone shouting in the desert:
‘Prepare the route that the Lord will take,
Straighten out his paths!’

⁴John himself had clothing made from camel’s hair, and a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and the whole area around the Jordan, were going off to him. ⁶They were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷He saw several Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized by him.

‘You brood of vipers!’ he said to them. ‘Who warned you to escape from the coming wrath? ⁸You’d better prove your repentance by bearing the right sort of fruit! ⁹And you needn’t start thinking to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father.” Let me tell you, God is quite capable of raising up children for Abraham from these stones! ¹⁰The axe is already taking aim at the root of the tree. Every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is to be cut down and thrown into the fire.’

¹¹‘I am baptizing you with water, for repentance,’ John continued. ‘But the one who is coming behind me is more powerful than me! I’m not even worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire! ¹²He’s got his shovel

in his hand, ready to clear out his barn, and gather all his corn into the granary. But he'll burn up the chaff with a fire that will never go out.'

When a couple get married, there is so much to learn. Not so much the immediate and obvious things – favourite foods, musical tastes, good ideas for holidays, and so on. There are deeper things that make each one of us mysterious and deeply special. The rich store of memories and mental associations. The older family history: stories told and retold, sorrows quietly aching in the background, tales of an exotic cousin here, a tragic uncle there, an aunt who wrote books or a great-grandfather who was cheated in business. Such stories shape our imaginations. They condition our reactions to new situations. When you join someone else's family it takes time to learn how all this works for them. Often you can only make sense of what someone says or does up front if you get in touch with the older, deeper stories that shaped them from their earliest days.

Matthew, writing his gospel, wants to help his readers to learn the great stories of the family into which they have come through their faith in Jesus Christ. Many of his readers were probably Jewish already. That made some things easier, others harder. He is telling the story of what happened within living memory – here, the story of John the Baptist getting people ready for Jesus – but he is also helping them to get in touch with the older, deeper stories of God's ancient people. Like all early Christian writers, Matthew is eager to explain how what has happened in and through Jesus is what the ancient stories had been pointing to all along.

He's already begun to do this in the first two chapters. There's the great long family tree right at the start, of course. But there are also the times when he has pointed back to the ancient scriptures to explain the meaning of the events he's describing. Now he takes this to a new level. He picks up one

of the most famous prophecies in the Old Testament, and declares that it came true in and through John the Baptist.

The prophecy in question summed up the longing and the praying of Israel over the previous five hundred years. Israel had been overrun by foreign armies. The Temple had been destroyed. God himself, they believed, had abandoned his people because of their wickedness, and had left them to their fate. Even when the Jews returned from Babylon and rebuilt the Temple, there was a lingering, uneasy sense that there was more to come, that all was not yet well. So they told the story like this: one day God will come back to rescue us. He'll come back and take charge of the whole world, and everything will be right at last. The God in heaven will be king of the earth! That's what we're waiting for.

So when John the Baptist suddenly appeared, down near the river Jordan, telling people that 'heaven' was going to take charge on earth (that's what 'the kingdom of heaven' means), it's not surprising that everyone set off to find out what was going on. John was plunging people into the Jordan. He was re-enacting the far-off moment when the ancient Israelites first entered their Promised Land. This is it! This is what we've been waiting for! Sharp-eyed people, then and later, said: This is the man the prophet spoke about. He is the 'voice in the wilderness', getting people ready for God to come back.

If we grasp nothing more than this, Matthew would have done half his job. But there are two other things going on here which also shape the way he's going to tell the rest of his story. First, lots of people coming to John have to be warned not to take God for granted. They may be Abraham's children physically, but God is doing a new thing. He is reshaping Abraham's family: sharp judgment on the one hand, an open invitation on the other. 'God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones!' This isn't the way many of them had been telling the story. It must have come as a shock.

Second, John kept telling people that he was preparing them for the arrival of Someone Else – Someone who would carry out this judgment against those who took their position for granted, Someone who would act in a much more dramatic way to bring the rule of ‘heaven’ to bear on earth. This Someone, we then discover, is Jesus himself. Everything that Matthew wants to say about Jesus must be understood as fulfilling this prophetic warning.

Those of us today who find ourselves among Jesus’ followers need to pay close attention to these ancient stories. They may be strange. But only if we learn how they work will we understand what sort of a family it is we now belong to.

Today

Gracious Lord, as your heavenly rule extends on earth, help us to know your story and live as your family.

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Matthew 4; focused on 4.18–25

¹⁸As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon (also called Peter) and Andrew his brother. They were fishermen, and were casting nets into the sea.

¹⁹‘Follow me!’ said Jesus. ‘I’ll make you fish for people!’

²⁰Straight away they abandoned their nets and followed him.

²¹He went on further, and saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother. They were in the boat, mending their nets, with Zebedee their father. He called them.

²²At once they left the boat, and their father, and followed him.

²³He went on through the whole of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, healing every disease and every illness among the people.

²⁴Word about him went out around the whole of Syria. They brought to him all the people tormented with various kinds

of diseases and ailments, demon-possessed people, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. ²⁵Large crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judaea and beyond the Jordan.

There's a sense of excitement at the start of the season. The ground is prepared and marked out. The fixture list is printed. Everything is ready. So along you go for the first match.

But imagine what it would be like if, just before the game was due to start, the coach came onto the pitch and began to point to people in the stands – people who had come as spectators! 'All right: you over there, come on; and you in the blue jacket, you too; and you there hiding near the back, I want you in the team . . .' You begin to be afraid you might be next. Suddenly the people who've been called are hurrying down to the field of play, and the game begins.

Of course no serious sports team today would do it like that – or, if they did, they wouldn't win many matches. But this is the strange thing. When God came back at last, coming to establish the rule of heaven here on earth, that seems to be exactly how he went about it. Lots of people who thought they were just spectators suddenly found themselves summoned onto the field of play. As the story goes on, we find out that they, like modern spectators dragged from the stands and made to play the game, were not as ready, or as fit, as they might have been. But it seems that that's how God wanted to work.

There's something going on there which gets near the heart of the challenge of the gospel for us today. It's very easy for people to imagine that they can be 'religious' – they can say their prayers, they can go to church, they can read the Bible – but basically they are looking on, spectating, while God does whatever God is going to do. And of course there's a sense in which that's true. God is not weak, helpless, waiting for humans to get their act together before he can do anything.

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY Matthew 4.1–11

But in another sense part of the point is that God always wanted humans to be part of the action, not just spectators. God made humans to reflect his image – his presence, his love, his plans – into the world. That’s why he himself came into the world as a human being. And that’s why Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John, and the others. They weren’t ready. They weren’t expecting it. But that’s how Jesus worked then, and that’s how he works to this day. Perhaps that’s why you’re reading Matthew’s gospel right now. Perhaps Jesus is going to point to you and ask you to help him with some of the work.

Of course, there were still quite a lot of people who remained spectators. As Jesus went about healing people – which was the most dramatic way of showing them that ‘heaven’ really was taking charge on earth – it was natural that great crowds followed him from all over. But here’s another challenge. What should the church be doing today that would make people realize that ‘heaven’ is actually in charge here and now? When we find the answer to that question, there will be lots more spectators – and, we may hope, lots more players too.

Today

Gracious Lord, help us to be ready when you call us to work with you.

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Matthew 4.1–11

¹Then Jesus was led out into the wilderness by the spirit to be tested by the devil. ²He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and at the end of it was famished. ³Then the tempter approached him.

‘If you really are God’s son,’ he said, ‘tell these stones to become bread!’

⁴“The Bible says,” replied Jesus, “that people don’t live only on bread. We live on every word that comes from God’s mouth.”

⁵Then the devil took him off to the holy city, and stood him on a pinnacle of the Temple.

⁶“If you really are God’s son,” he said, “throw yourself down. The Bible does say, after all, that

God will command his angels to look after you,
and they will carry you in their hands,
so that you won’t hurt your foot against a stone.”

⁷“But the Bible also says,” replied Jesus, “that you mustn’t make the Lord your God prove himself!”

⁸Then the devil took him off again, this time to a very high mountain. There he showed him all the magnificent kingdoms of the world.

⁹“I’ll give the whole lot to you,” he said, “if you will fall down and worship me.”

¹⁰“Get out of it, satan!” replied Jesus. “The Bible says, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone!””

¹¹Then the devil left him, and angels came and looked after him.

It starts with a flicker of thought, a tiny little idea that darts across the mind while you’re doing something else. It seems harmless, just one of the millions of things that the human brain comes up with. But then it returns, a minute or an hour later. You feel it now as something familiar, and perhaps enticing. If I claim travel expenses for that trip, even though I had a ride from a friend . . . if I had a chance to say that really cutting remark to the man who’s always been mean to me . . . if I played my cards right, I might persuade my friend’s spouse to spend an evening with me, and then maybe . . .

Always, to begin with, it seems quite reasonable, only just a bit off limits. But if we play with the idea, or allow it to play

with us, then a new course is set, heading for disaster at one level or another.

Christians have always found comfort in the fact that Jesus was tempted as we are. But his temptations, in this famous story, are not just an example, showing us how to resist, though of course they are that too. (Notice how his mind, well stocked with scripture, comes back again and again with the right response.) They are part of the larger story of how ‘heaven’s rule’ came to earth.

Part of the point of the ‘kingdom of heaven’, you see, and of Jesus’ own mission to make it happen, is that there was another power ruling the earth. If Jesus was to bring God’s rescuing rule to the world, the present power had to be defeated. Jesus’ ‘temptations’ are therefore the personal side of the larger battle he had to fight if God’s rule was to take hold. Like David fighting Goliath, he had to take on the enemy one to one if the people as a whole were to be set free.

The three temptations here, like most if not all temptations, are good things that are being distorted. Bread is good. Jesus will later create a huge amount of it from a few loaves, to feed hungry people. But should he do that just for himself – and just to satisfy himself that he really is the ‘Son of God’, as the heavenly voice at his baptism had said? No: Jesus will satisfy himself with what God has said, rather than with any attempt to prove it.

So, too, Jesus may already have had a sense that his own vocation would end in a horrible death, trusting that God would raise him from the dead. But the satanic distortion of this is that he should perform a crazy stunt to attract attention. Again, Jesus refuses: that would be using God’s power as magic.

Finally, it’s clear throughout Matthew’s gospel, and particularly at the very end, that Jesus as ‘king of the Jews’ is to become the true lord of the whole world. But the path by which he moves to that lordship is not the satanic one which would make him grab it for his own ends. The whole of the book is

about the alternative path, the true way by which Jesus comes to embody heaven's rule on earth.

Once more, we are not simply spectators in this extraordinary drama. We, too, are tempted to do the right things in the wrong way, or for the wrong reason. Part of the discipline of Lent is about learning to recognize the flickering impulses, the whispering voices, for what they are, and to have the scripture-fuelled courage to resist. We, too, are part of the ongoing battle for heaven's rule to be established on earth. Every successful fight against temptation is one more step on the road to the ultimate victory.

Today

Lord Jesus, as you saw through the temptations and refused them, give us wisdom to recognize the tempter's voice, and strength to resist.

WEEK 1: SUNDAY

Psalm 32

- ¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
- ²Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
- ³While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
- ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
- ⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD',
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.
- ⁶Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.

- ⁷You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me
from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.
- ⁸I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
- ⁹Do not be like a horse or a mule without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.
- ¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.
- ¹¹Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

A long time ago, when I had just learnt to drive, I ran out of petrol on a lonely country road. I gratefully accepted some fuel from a nearby farmer. What he didn't tell me was that it was a mixture designed not for a car, but for a lawn mower. I got back home all right, but the next day the car behaved like a sick animal, coughing and spluttering. I made it down to the local garage, where the mechanic explained what the wrong fuel does to the engine. There was thick, messy stuff in the carburettor where there should have been clear petrol. He cleaned it out, and I felt – and it was as though the car felt – a huge sigh of relief. Even to hear the engine running smoothly was a delight. Now I was free again, free not to have to worry about the car but to think, more positively, where I might want to go.

That is the mood of this Psalm. It would be wrong to think of it, as some do when the question of sin and confession comes up, as a gloomy poem. Some Christian traditions these days seem to do as little 'confessing' as they can, in case it spoils the happy mood they want to maintain. But that's like trying to carry on driving while the engine is complaining it's running on the wrong stuff. Confession is facing up to what's wrong. The first two verses of the Psalm list four different types of problem: 'offence' or 'transgression' (breaking of a

known command), 'sin' (missing the mark of genuine humanness), 'guilt' or 'iniquity' (the murky stuff inside me where there should be clarity and openness) and 'deceit' (the vain attempt to pretend all is well – a very common problem today). And the reason we do this is the same reason I went to the mechanic. As the Psalmist says in verses 3 and 4, it was hard to live like that.

It's only then that we discover why the Psalm declares that people who confess what's wrong inside are 'blessed' or 'happy'. The Psalm is actually a great celebration: it's over! It's gone! It's been dealt with! And instead of the heavy, dark feeling inside, there is a sudden sense of God's presence, protecting and rescuing us (verses 6 and 7).

Only then do we discover that forgiveness isn't just a matter of bringing the bank balance, as it were, back from a huge debt to a balance of zero. Once the car has been cleaned out, we are free to hear a fresh call from God, to hear when he whispers and feel when he nudges, rather than having to be treated like an unbroken horse or mule (verses 8 and 9). A well-trained horse is one that has learnt to sense the rider's hopes and intentions and even to anticipate them. It is as though the mechanic not only fixed the car but showed me on the map some wonderful places to visit that I'd never imagined before.

That's why the poem closes, once again, with celebration. Put off the task of confession and the mess will only get worse, leading to all kinds of trouble. But trust in the Lord – and that trust will often begin by trusting him with our saddest and darkest secrets – and we will find his love surrounding us. It's like going outside on the first spring morning where suddenly you realize it's not cold any more. Lent is a time for discipline, for confession, for honesty, not because God is mean or fault-finding or finger-pointing but because he wants us to know the joy of being cleaned out, ready for all the good things he now has in store.

WEEK 1: MONDAY Matthew 5

Today

Father, help me, this Lent, to confess my sin honestly and to celebrate the new life which you give to those who trust you.