

The birth of Jesus

Mt 1:18-25

Tim Anderson Playgroup Christmas 4/12/22

Who chose your name?

I haven't ever asked my parents which one of them hit upon the name Tim.

I should do that.

Tim is not a family name as far as I'm aware.

My grandfathers were Robert and James, or Bob and Jim.

No Timothy in their middle names either.

No Timothy amongst the uncles.

I don't know where it came from.

But one thing I am sure of,

it was the idea of either my mother or my father.

It's the prerogative of parents to name the children.

There's no more sure fire way of getting unpopular as a grandparent than to try to tell your children what to call their kids.

Spare a thought for Mary and Joseph.

They had no say in the name of their first born son.

The angel appeared in a dream to Joseph.

We read what he was told in our reading.

1:21 "She will give birth to a son,
and you are to give him the name Jesus."

It doesn't matter if you already had a favourite name picked out.

It doesn't matter if Joseph's father Heli
wanted to be honoured in the family line.

So why does God not allow Joseph and Mary
to choose the name of their son?

Here are two reasons.

The first is less important than the second.

The first reason is because God is saying whose son Jesus is really.
Jesus was actually not Joseph's son at all in a biological sense.
Joseph was if you like an adoptive father.
Jesus had none of his genetic material.
As the angel said,
1:20 "what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."
He's not your son, Joseph, he's mine.
And so I get naming rights.

Now it's actually important that Jesus is God's Son,
not Joseph's son.
Sometimes people think that the virgin birth
is just a slightly weird little sideline about Jesus.
It doesn't matter much.
Sometimes people even think that the church made up the virgin birth.
Here's how the story goes.
Christian people are followers of Jesus.
They couldn't cope with the thought
that their hero was born out of wedlock,
so they made up this story about the virgin birth
to give Jesus a special status
and shroud him in some sort of mystique.
But actually he was just a gifted teacher
and the church made up all the supernatural stuff.
Well it's a funny thing that Matthew and Luke
who have completely independent accounts of Jesus' birth,
like literally just about nothing matches.
Matthew has the angel appearing to Joseph in a dream,
Luke has an angel appearing to Mary to tell her she's going to have a baby.
Matthew has the wise men,
Luke has the shepherds.
Matthew has the escape to Egypt,

Luke has Jesus' baptism in the temple on the eighth day.
Literally nothing matches except one thing.
You guessed it.
The virgin birth.
Because it's important.
It's important because of what Jesus has come to do.
Only someone who was both fully human and fully God
could do the job Jesus came to do.
The virgin birth was how Jesus was both fully human and fully God.
He was fully a descendent of Mary,
and he was fully conceived in her by God's Holy Spirit.
Fully human and fully God.
That was the only way he could do his job.
More on that a bit later.

But for the moment we are answering the question,
why does God choose the name for Jesus?
The first reason is because Jesus is God's Son
and so God gets the naming rights.

The second reason is because God had a name picked out.
In the Bible, God actually gives quite a number of people their names.
It's always about what the name means.
So for example, God changes the name of Abram to Abraham.
Abraham means father of many.
God had chosen Abraham to be the father of many nations.
Slightly more controversially, and not as well known,
God named the prophet Hosea's daughters.
Hi first daughter was named 'Lo Ruhanah'.
That means 'not loved'.
This was not because Hosea didn't love his daughter.
It was a sign of God's judgement on the rebellious nation of Israel.

Hosea's daughter just got used as a billboard
to advertise God's displeasure.
Well just like Abraham and Lo Ruhanah,
Jesus has a meaning.
Jesus means 'The Lord saves'.
And God gives people names with meanings
because the meaning is important.
The angel told Joseph,
"You are to give him the name Jesus
because he will save his people from their sins."
Saving people from their sins was Jesus' reason for coming to earth.
You get it from the Christmas carols,
back when the carols were written,
they understood this stuff.
Hark the Herald angels says,
"God and sinners reconciled"
O Little Child of Bethlehem says,
"Cast out our sin and enter in,
be born in us today."
Jesus came to save his people from their sins.

Here's a claim.

The number one measure of a person's spiritual health
is whether they realise that they need to be saved from their sins.
I bet if you took a poll of randomly selected Australians
and asked them what is the number one thing they need to be saved from,
you would get a bunch of responses like these.

1. Natural disasters - floods, droughts, bushfires and the like
2. Crazy dictators - Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un.
3. Scammers - people who try to rob you by tricking you.
4. Sickness - from covid to cancer we need saving.
5. Myself - I can't control my eating / drinking / gambling.

The first four are all about things out there, not about me at all.
The fifth is getting closer to mark.
But even when we talk about being saved from ourselves,
we don't mean that we are objectively guilty in God's eyes.
We just mean that we damage our own futures
by not acting in our own long term interests.
But sin is not about damaging you future by unwise actions.
It's about offending the God who made you
by ignoring him in the world that he made.
It's focused on how we treat God,
not how we treat ourselves.
And that's what Jesus came to save us from.

My claim is that it's more important for us to be saved from our sins
than to be saved from natural disasters, crazy dictators, scammers,
sickness, or our own unwise choices.

You can get an accurate measurement of a person's spiritual health
by whether they acknowledge that claim to be true.

You can get an accurate measurement of a church's spiritual health
by listening to the prayers.

If the prayers in a church are all focused on saving us from natural
disasters, crazy dictators, scammers, and sickness,
and there is no prayer for the spiritually lost
who need to be saved from their sins,
then that is evidence of a church in poor spiritual health.

God told us what was most important when he sent Jesus.

1:21 "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."

Jesus is not the only name given to God's son in our reading.

Matthew tells us,

1:22-23

"All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet,

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son,

and they will call him Immanuel which means 'God with us'."

700 odd years before Jesus was born,

the prophet Isaiah was having a very robust discussion with the King of Judah, Ahaz.

Isaiah was trying to encourage Ahaz to trust in God.

Ahaz was refusing to trust God

because trusting in God and doing as he was told looked very risky to him.

Some armies were marching towards Jerusalem.

Isaiah said, "You can trust God.

God has promised to look after you."

Ahaz said, "These armies look way too scary for me."

Isaiah said, "Ask God for a sign to show he is with you,

he will give you a sign."

Ahaz said, "I'm not going to ask."

Because if he was given a sign, then he would have to start trusting God.

He didn't want to put his life in God's hands.

So Isaiah said,

"OK don't ask for a sign then.

God is going to give you one anyway.

A virgin is going to have a child called Immanuel.

(That means God is with us.)

You want to know that God is with you,

there's going to be a baby called "God is with us".

That's your sign.

And presumably some young woman in Jerusalem had a baby and called him Immanuel.

But Matthew reads the prophesy of Isaiah

and says this wasn't just about 700 years ago.
Isaiah was also speaking about now.
Jesus is God with us.
Not like in Isaiah's day,
just a sign that God is on the side of his people.
Jesus is God with us,
literally, God come to dwell with human beings.
God in physical form.

Now of course that does mean all the things that Isaiah meant.
God is on the side of his faithful people.
If he wasn't on our side,
he wouldn't be saving us from our sins.
But it's more than that.
God in physical form is the only way we can be saved from our sins.
Jesus is fully human and fully God.
I said we'd have a bit more on that later.
Only someone who is fully human and fully God
can save us from our sins.
What does it take to save us?
The price of sin has to be paid.
God can't ignore sin and pass over it.
People sometimes ask me,
"Why can't God just turn a blind eye to sin?
Why does there have to be a sacrifice made?"
Would you want to go to a heaven
run by a God who turned a blind eye to sin?
That kind of a heaven would stop being heavenly real fast.

Anyone who's ever been to a party knows
that a party is only as much fun as who turns up.
If there's a bunch of people at a party who want to create mischief,

or if there's a bunch of people who are just plain unpleasant to be around,
then the party is not much fun.

Heaven is party.

And what makes heaven good is that only perfection is allowed in.

Think about an exclusive night club.

They have bouncers on the door so that only the right people can get in.

Let too much riff raff in,

it lowers the tone of the place,

and then the really cool people won't want to be seen there.

God is the bouncer on heaven's door.

And only perfection gets in.

It's the only way to keep heaven perfect.

That's why Jesus had to be fully God.

He came before the Father and he had to be perfect.

And he shares his perfection with everyone who he saves from their sins.

And that's how we get to be good enough to go to heaven.

But Jesus also had to be fully human.

When he went to the cross,

he went there on our behalf.

He did it as our representative.

Only someone who is fully human could represent us.

Jesus paid the price on behalf of humanity.

And only a human can pay the price on behalf of humanity.

In order to save us from our sins,

Jesus had to be fully human and fully God.

Fully human to represent us.

Fully God to be able to clothe us with his perfection

so that we would be good enough for heaven.

And so that's why the virgin birth is important.
It's not some slightly weird sideline
invented so that Christians could cope
with their hero being born out of wedlock.
It's a fully central part of the story.
Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
that is fully God.
He was born of the virgin Mary,
that is fully human.
It's how Jesus saves his people from their sins.
It's how Jesus can be Immanuel.
God with us.
Even God one of us.