

Mt 2:13-23

*Tim Anderson 18/12/2022*

When car manufacturers are starting work on a new model of car, one thing they do before they build the first one, is to make a scaled down model.

It's not enough just to have drawings on pieces of paper, they need to make a model, and check that everything is right, before they proceed to making a prototype- the real thing.

The prototype is a copy of the model if you like.

But it's not a copy how you might usually think of a copy.

We usually think of a copy like a cheap imitation.

The Rolex watches for sale in Hong Kong.

The forgery of the great artist's masterpiece.

But the prototype of a new model car is a copy of the model that is far bigger and better than the original.

The copy outshines the model it was designed from in every way.

The bible often works like that.

There is an earlier event which functions as a model.

And there is a later event

which is in some ways a copy of the earlier event,

but when the later event happens,

we realise that the earlier event was just a preparation.

The later event outshines the earlier in every way.

Today we look at the second half of the story of the astrologers who visited Jesus.

It's one of those passages you could never preach on Christmas Day, so we are taking it a week earlier.

The astrologers visited, gave their gifts and headed home.

And what we read today is how that event worked itself out, when Herod realised that he had been tricked.

You could read this story at two levels.

On the surface it's a story about how God preserved the life of his Son. God snatched the Lord Jesus away from a brutal king to safety in Egypt, until that brutal king died.

And then God sent his Son back to live in Israel.

And thus was preserved the hope of humanity, because if Herod had got Jesus, we all would have died in our sins.

On the surface, that is what the story is about.

But there's plenty more going on just underneath the surface.

The clues are in the words of the Old Testament prophets

In verse 15,

“And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’”

In verse 17,

“The what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

‘A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.’”

And in verse 23,

“So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets:

‘He will be called a Nazarene.’”

You might think, hearing those quotes from the Old Testament, that the prophets had predicted that when the Messiah came he would have to flee to Egypt,

“Out of Egypt I called my son.”

You might think the prophets predicted a massacre of children, by an evil ruler trying to kill the messiah,

“A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning ...”

You might have thought that the prophets predicted that the messiah would live in Nazareth,

“He will be called a Nazarene.”  
 But if you thought those things,  
 you would be wrong.

The quote,  
 “Out of Egypt I called my son,”  
 comes from the prophet Hosea.  
 In the prophecy, God is speaking,  
 and he’s talking about the nation of Israel in the Exodus.  
 To God, the nation of Israel is like his son.  
 When they were in slavery in Egypt, he called them out,  
 and took them into the promised land.

The quote,  
 “A voice is heard in Ramah,  
 weeping and great mourning,  
 Rachael weeping for her children  
 and refusing to be comforted,  
 because they are no more,”  
 comes from the prophet Jeremiah.  
 Jeremiah is not talking about a lady whose children have died.  
 Jeremiah is talking about Rachel, the wife of Jacob, the patriarch.  
 Rachel, who lived 800 odd years before Jeremiah did.  
 Rachael, who because she was Jacobs wife,  
 was considered to be the mother of all Israel.  
 Rachael, weeping for her children,  
 that is,  
 Rachael, weeping from inside her grave,  
 because her children,  
 the nation of Israel in Jeremiah’s day,  
 were heading off into exile in Babylon.  
 And her nation was a nation no more.  
 Her children were no more.

The quote,

“He will be called a Nazarene,”  
is actually not a quote from any of the prophets.  
Which is not so surprising,  
since Nazareth the town did not exist when the prophets were writing.

Now lots of people reading Matthew  
have taken the fairly uncharitable view  
that Matthew is doing violence to the Old Testament.  
He’s ripping any quote out of context,  
or even making quotes up  
in a desperate attempt to show that Jesus is the prophesied messiah.  
“Hosea wasn’t talking about the messiah,  
he was talking about Israel”, they say.  
Jeremiah wasn’t talking about a massacre of babies,  
he was talking about a nation going off into exile.  
And as for the third quote,  
that’s sheer desperation.

But in fact Matthew understands the mind of God  
much better than contemporary scholars.  
Which shouldn’t be surprising  
because he was inspired by God to do his writing.  
Matthew sees that Jesus is in fact a copy of the nation of Israel.  
But like the prototype car surpasses its model in every way,  
Jesus, the new nation of Israel  
surpasses the old nation of Israel in every way.  
There are many similarities between Jesus and the nation.  
Moses, the leader of the nation at the time of the exodus,  
escaped infanticide at the hands of an evil king,  
and Jesus, the new leader of God’s people,  
is escaping infanticide at the hands of an evil king.  
The old nation of Israel was called  
to live in a special relationship with God.  
A relationship so close,  
that as the prophet Hosea said,

it would be like that of a Father and Son.  
But in this new Israel,  
Jesus actually is God's Son.  
His only begotten Son.  
After the old nation of Israel came out of Egypt,  
they were tempted in the wilderness,  
and they fell into sin before a golden calf.  
But when Jesus, the new Israel was called out of Egypt,  
he too was tempted in the wilderness.  
But he did not succumb to temptation.  
Jesus does all the things that the nation of Israel was meant to do  
but Jesus does them properly.  
When Matthew applies the quote from Hosea to Jesus,  
he's not grasping at straws.  
He correctly sees that Hosea is talking about God's adopted son,  
the nation Israel,  
and he's showing us in this story,  
that whatever was true for God's adopted son  
is also true for his only begotten Son.  
Save that in Jesus are none of Israel's imperfections.  
Jesus is the prototype and Israel is the model.

When Jeremiah prophesied,  
Jer 31:15 "A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more,"  
It's actually in the middle of a chapter of hope.  
God actually replies to the voice in these words,  
Jer 31:16-17 "Restrain your voice from weeping  
and your eyes from tears,  
for your work will be rewarded,"  
declares the Lord.  
"They will return from the land of the enemy.

So there is hope for your descendents,”  
declares the Lord.

“Your children will return to their own land.”

There were people in Jeremiah’s day  
who thought the exile was the end of the world.  
God’s people were being removed from their land,  
their temple was being destroyed,  
the city of David was being razed to the ground.  
There was great pain for God’s people.  
And yet God’s message to them was of future hope.  
There will be a restoration,  
there will be a return.  
The exile will finish.

By the time Jesus was born,  
the people of Israel were back in the land,  
and the city had been rebuilt.  
But the exile continued.  
How could anyone say it didn’t  
when the nation was ruled by as evil a man as Herod?  
This massacre of infants in Bethlehem was small by Herod’s standards.  
There might have been 20 odd boys up to the age of 2 years  
in Bethlehem.  
It was nothing for Herod to execute hundreds at a time for no reason.  
He was brutal.  
But he was no more brutal  
than the Babylonians at the time the exile began.  
So when Matthew quotes Jeremiah,  
he is resonating with the pain of those who have lost their children.  
But he is also helping us to see God’s restoration and renewal  
on the other side of that pain.  
The exile is finally finished for God’s people  
in the child who has escaped Herod’s massacre.  
The promises made by God through Jeremiah  
come to complete fulfilment in Jesus.

The exiles who returned to Israel from Babylon under Ezra and Nehemiah suffered from the same faults as their fore-fathers. Their devotion to God was patchy. Their love for each other was sporadic. And they couldn't enter fully into the good things God had promised them. The return to the land from Babylon under Ezra and Nehemiah was like the model car. It ended the exile in a 'sort of kind of' way. Jesus is the prototype. In Jesus, the separation between God and people is destroyed. We can have perfect fellowship with God. We can be ruled by King Jesus instead of King Herod. In Jesus, the exile is finally over properly.

The last of Matthew's references to prophetic fulfilment is perhaps the most puzzling. "He will be called a Nazarene." None of the prophets ever used those words. Indeed the town of Nazareth didn't even exist. So what does it mean, and why does Matthew make the reference? To be a Nazarene is to be a nothing, a non entity, someone who others despise and poke fun at. You get a bit of a picture of it from the story in John's gospel, where Jesus is calling his first followers. Philip has met Jesus and he is impressed. So he goes and tells Nathanael about it. "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael's response is illuminating. "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathaniel clearly wouldn't mean it as a complement

if he called you a Nazarene!  
And it wasn't as if Nathaniel was a snob  
and if someone came from Nazareth he didn't want to meet them.  
His problem was  
that Philip was offering to introduce him to the messiah.  
And he couldn't believe that the Messiah could come from Nazareth.  
The Messiah should be a great hero, not a despised nobody.  
Nathaniel wasn't alone in having this view of the messiah.  
Most of his contemporaries were similar.  
And that's why Matthew wants to remind us that the prophets had said  
that Jesus would be a Nazarene.  
Not that they specifically predicted he would grow up in Nazareth,  
but Matthew wants us to call to mind passages such as this one,  
from Isaiah 53,  
Is 53:2-3 "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by mankind,  
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.  
Like one from whom people hide their faces  
he was despised and we held him in low esteem."  
That description has all the features  
Nathanael found in the word Nazarene.  
It was one the Jews of Jesus day  
had left out of their mental picture of the messiah.  
And one Matthew wanted to remind them had been there all along,  
before they took offence at Jesus' weakness and humility.

So on the surface of it,  
today's reading is a story of Jesus being miraculously protected  
from danger  
by a God who is determined to save his people.  
But underneath,  
just below the surface,  
this is a story about what sort of messiah Jesus came to be.  
Jesus is the messiah foretold by Jeremiah,



who finally puts an end to the exile.

Who restores God's relationship with his people.

How does Jesus achieve this?

By becoming Israel himself.

By doing the things that Israel was meant to do,  
and doing them flawlessly.

How will people respond to their messiah?

They will despise him and reject him.

Matthew sees the story of Jesus' life in the story of his childhood.

And so he tells us the story of Jesus' childhood,

so we can know that he truly is God's messiah

the story of his life was planned by God from the beginning.

Jesus was never plan B

because God's first intention to bless the world through the nation Israel  
failed.

The nation Israel was always a model –

a model that found its fulfilment in the prototype Jesus.

The person who truly lived as Israel, God's Son.

Matthew tells us the story of Jesus' childhood

so we will bow the knee in worship.