

Journeying with the Magi

An Exploration of Advent in Prayer and Meditation



Session Three

PARISH OF ALL SAINTS WOKINGHAM
PARISH OFFICE, THE CORNERSTONE, NORREYS AVENUE, WOKINGHAM RG40 1UE
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Opening Prayers

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

Amen

God with us, your moment has come. In the dark of the womb, you waited. Bathed in the balm of the star, you rest. Into a world sorely in need of your light, you are born. When you knock on our door looking for room, may we welcome you. Like the herald of your birth, call us to share your good news first with those who are poor, excluded, and afraid.

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out.

Lord, you have given us your Word for a light to shine upon our path; grant us so to meditate on that Word, and to follow its teaching, that we may find in it the light that shines more and more until the perfect day; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

In this Advent of expectation,

draw us together in unity, that our praise and worship might echo in these walls and also through our lives.

In this Advent of expectation,

draw us together in mission, that the hope within might be the song we sing and the melody of our lives.

In this Advent of expectation,

draw us together in service, that the path we follow might lead us from a stable to a glimpse of eternity.

As we move and grow within the rhythms of Advent, may we sense the continuing presence of the Holy Three.

Deep peace of the Creator,

Gentle love of the Son,

Regenerative power of the Spirit

Amen

Show us, Lord Jesus, how we may best prepare to celebrate Your birth into this world. Show us those things we need to repent of, that we may find Your forgiveness. Show us how to avoid the greed and selfishness of this season and focus on what is truly essential. Amen.

The Journey: Worship

Last week, we shared our thoughts on the two reflective articles by Andrew Demotses and Catherine Looker. We discussed the distractions and disappointments that are a part of our lives, and we considered the 'life skills' recommended by Catherine, for our own spiritual journey. We discussed the light versus dark analogy and shared our thoughts on the prayer/poem regarding finding the light. We read a reflection by Delia Smith and touched on the biblical meaning of repentance being a turning to God.

The homework set was to read and consider a number of biblical references. You will have worked out that the significance of these references is that they tell the whole nativity story from prophecy to fulfilment. They make an ideal reading list for Advent reflection. *(At the back of this course booklet, I have printed out the readings so that you can easily use them for reflective prayer this Advent)*

In today's final session, we will review the story of the Magi and their significance in the story and to our own 'journey' of discovery.



As we have discussed, the story traces the quest of these Magi to find the one who was born king of the Jews. They follow the star, and maybe take a wrong turning or simply assuming a king would be born in a palace, arrive in Jerusalem. They seek an audience with King Herod, receive directions, and are 'coached' by the king. They visit Bethlehem, once again following the star, and find the baby, whereupon they do homage to the child.

All Matthew tells us is that they were 'wise men from the East'. Yet, the story has grown over the years. We have dismissed the idea that they were Kings (probably because of the deference they showed Herod in their meetings and their willingness to follow his instruction to return with word of the baby). We have no proof that there were three of them other than the description of them presenting three gifts. But the legend has grown. It is commonly assumed that they were probably a priestly caste of very wise men from Mesopotamia, perhaps Persia or Babylonia—but we are not told. They were supposedly famous for their learning, and for their wisdom (Matthew simply calls them 'wise' men). They were very interested in astronomy/astrology (possibly because we are told they 'observed His star at its rising' and this decided them to undertake their quest. But it's still an assumption). To be fair, they must have been interested in, familiar with, or had

access to ancient prophecies or servants that were knowledgeable, because they refer to the new baby as being 'born king of the Jews'. This must be from an earlier prophesy.

We know that the stars were thought to provide omens and portents and therefore anything out of the ordinary, was taken by them to be some kind of divine sign or instruction. But one can quickly see how such a popular story has become embellished, even to the point of giving the 'wise men' names. There was a wide assortment of names suggested for the Magi, those that eventually prevailed were **Gaspar (or Caspar), Melchior, and Balthasar.**

There is even a question I found on Google asking the name of the 'black wise man'!

If we go back to the scripture, we quickly realise, that we have used assumption and imagination to build quite a story. A story inhabited by characters whom we have invented. Whether they even existed is debatable, but we have embraced and welcomed the story. Who didn't want to be a 'king' in our school nativity plays?

So, what is the reason for their inclusion? They only appear in Matthew. Luke doesn't even mention them.

Apart from the exotic 'flavour' they give to Matthew's narrative, their role in the story is to reveal and underscore the truth that Matthew is presenting, that Jesus is the promised Messiah, not a tribal king, and that this truth was a real threat to the reigning king, Herod.

And how Matthew does this, is contained in the words:

And when they had come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him (NKJV Matt.2.11)

I have used the King James words because the NRSV refers to 'paying homage' which to me, does not portray the same sense of importance, awe, reverence or spontaneous reaction on coming face to face with God. Matthew certainly has in mind that the natural response to Jesus is more than simply homage, as to a king. He expects worship, falling down, prostrating on faces, to the Lord of heaven and earth. We should also remember that Herod also expresses the desire to 'pay homage' clearly delineating his view of a king-to-king relationship, not king to God.

In the Biblical accounts of worship, many postures are described. Abraham fell upon his face before God. (Genesis 17:3, 17.) Moses prayed with his hands outstretched. (Exodus 9:27-29.) King Solomon knelt in prayer. (I Kings 8:54.) Jesus prayed looking up into heaven. (Mark 6:41, John 11:41, and 17:1.)

But we are told that the 'wise men', 'fell down and worshipped Him.

It is an acknowledgement of total unworthiness.

When God made a covenant with Abraham, Abraham recognized his unworthiness before God and "*fell on his face*" before the Lord. (Genesis 17:1–22.)

It is recognition of the need for God's mercy.

When the leper came to Jesus for healing, he fell on his face and begged for mercy, saying, "*Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean*" (Luke 5:12.)

It is a right response to a serious crisis.

Often when the leaders of Israel faced impossible situations and knew that only God could deliver them, they fell on their faces before Him and sought His aid. (Numbers 20:2–6 and Joshua 7:1–6.)

The reaction then of the 'wise men' is therefore very important in the story, because their act of prostrating themselves tells us that this child Jesus was far more than a future king. Only if He is divine could He be worshiped. Worship includes submission, adoration, homage and maybe an element of fear.

Advent is a good time to review our own worship. How far are we prepared to go on our 'journey', have we packed the right things to help us get there, are we prepared for setbacks, distractions and changes of direction? The story, from prophecy, to return from Egypt, gives us so much to consider and to reflect on where we are on our 'journey'.



The Journey: Gifts

So, have the 'wise men' fulfilled their role? No. They still have two more important roles to play in the narrative.

But before we look at those, we should take a little time to acknowledge that apart from the drama of Matthew's narrative, the primary "mover" in the story, God. He is not specifically mentioned, but His presence is there throughout the story. The "star" had guided the wise men to Bethlehem. The prophecy had recorded exactly where Messiah should be born, and the dream warned them to return home a different way. Without this divine intervention they would never have come, the scribes would not have known where to send them, and they would certainly have fallen into Herod's trap without the warning in their dreams. The supernatural element moving in the lives of the Magi is the true cause of their actions, prophesy, star, dreams.

Back to the 'wise men'. Upon finding the baby Jesus,

"they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh" (Matt. 2.11)

If you have ever dismissed the gifts, as an unimportant detail in Matthew's story, you may have overlooked another message Matthew is keen to impart.

In fact, many different theories of the meaning and symbolism of the gifts have been developed over the centuries. While gold is fairly obviously explained, frankincense, and particularly myrrh, are more obscure.

The theories generally break down into two groups:

1. All three gifts are ordinary offerings and gifts given to a king. However, the significance of the 'wise men' still offering the gifts to the baby born in humble surrounds and lacking any of the expected regal trappings should not be overlooked as it provides further emphasis that the 'wise men' accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

or
2. The three gifts had a spiritual meaning: gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense (an incense) as a symbol of deity, and myrrh (an embalming oil) as a symbol of death. This dates back to a major apologetics work by the Church Father Origen of Alexandria, written in around 248 AD, 'Contra Celsum': gold, as to a king; myrrh, as to one who was mortal; and incense, as to a God.'

This latter interpretation is alluded to in the verses of the popular carol 'We Three Kings' in which the Magi describe their gifts. The last verse includes a summary of the interpretation: 'Glorious now behold Him arise/King and God and sacrifice'

Other more general suggestions place gold as symbolizing virtue, frankincense symbolizing prayer, and myrrh symbolizing suffering.

The Syrian King Seleucus is recorded as having offered gold, frankincense and myrrh to Apollo in his temple at Didyma in 288/7 BC, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi and this may have been the precedent for the mention of these three gifts in Matthew.

Matthew consistently draws upon Scripture, and we should not be surprised that there are links also to Isaiah 60:

*the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.*

and Psalm 72

*May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts.
May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service.*

*Long may he live!
May gold of Sheba be given to him.*

Given Matthew's eagerness to link prophecy and scripture to Jesus, it would be unwise not to assume that he was aware of earlier writings on the subject and expected the symbolism to be obvious to his readers. There is nothing without a reason in Matthew.

What subsequently happened to these gifts is never mentioned in the scripture, but several traditions have developed. One story has the gold being stolen by the two thieves who were later crucified alongside Jesus. Another tale has it being entrusted to and then misappropriated by Judas. One tradition suggests that Joseph and Mary used the gold to finance their travels when they fled Bethlehem after an angel had warned, in a dream, about Herod's plan to kill Jesus. And another story proposes the theory that the myrrh given to them at Jesus' birth was used to anoint Jesus' body after his crucifixion.

All of which demonstrates the dangerous relationship between fact and fiction, truth, and fantasy, and the need to check which is which.

The Journey: 'return by a different route'



The 'wise men' have one more role to play before we can let them go.

Dreams play an important part in Matthew's narrative. Joseph had no less than four dreams: to tell him to take Mary as his wife despite her pregnancy, to flee from Herod, to return from Egypt to Judea and subsequently to be told to go instead to Galilee.

The 'wise men' also receive a message in a dream. Matthew understates it because the real drama is reserved for the result of their clandestine departure:

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road

(Note the word 'country' singular.)

Geza Vermes* (2006), argues that Matthew used the Magi to 'provide the psychological background for the edict issued by the deceived and frenzied king, which according to Matthew's story led to the massacre of all but one of the male infants of Bethlehem.'

The subsequent story of the flight of the Holy Family and the Massacre of the Innocents, leads to a much bigger discussion when Matthew's story parallels Moses' escape from the massacre of the Jewish children ordered by Pharaoh, and thus starts to create a link between Jesus and Moses. And that would really appeal to his Jewish readership.

That, however, is a subject for another day.

*Vermes, G. 2006, *The Nativity History and Legend*, London, Penguin

We have reached the end of our short program looking at the Journey of the Magi.

When you read Matthew's narrative again, the account of the Magi is surprisingly short. We all know the story but, in our minds, have probably built a bigger story around it. The important thing is not to miss the reasons why Matthew brings it into his narrative and the symbolism and inferences he wants to draw out for his readership.

Whether we believe in the factuality of the 'wise men', they are key to Matthew's message that Jesus is God and that he is there for all mankind, Jew and Gentile. For that, we should give thanks, taking the time this Advent to reflect on what that means for us.

Keeping Christmas

Poet: Henry VanDyke

Are you willing to forget what you have done for other people.
and to remember what other people have done for you;
to ignore what the world owes you,
and to think what you owe the world;...
and to close your book of complaints against the management of the universe,
and look around you for a place where you can sow a few seeds of happiness -
are you willing to do these things even for a day?
Then you can keep Christmas.

Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world -
stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death -
and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem nineteen hundred years ago is the image and
brightness of the Eternal Love?
Then you can keep Christmas.

And if you keep it for a day, why not always?
But you can never keep it alone.



Closing Prayers:

Days of heavy clouds stifling the sunlight;
the world burdened by greyness and gloom
**Open our eyes, Lord, to the coming of your light
lifting the burden of darkness from our lives.**

Chillness that seeps deep into bones;
hearts and spirits rigid with frost-hardness;
souls wrapped up against coldness and loneliness.
**Open our souls, Lord, to the warmth of your coming
melting the hardness that keeps us from you and from each other.**

Trees, branches bare against the steel skies;
Stems crumpled under weight of frost, weight of snow;
Last year's leaves, blackened and slippery underfoot;
Nature oppressed by wintriness, yet resting, awaiting rebirth.
**Cherish our hearts, Lord, oppressed by wintriness -
assure us of your coming of your call to new life.**

Be to us, O God, a bright flame before us, a guiding star above us, a smooth path beneath us, and a kindly shepherd behind us today, tonight, and forever

Jesus Christ, you come to transfigure us and to renew us in the image of God: shine in our darkness.

Jesus Christ, light of our hearts, you know our thirst: lead us to the wellspring of your Gospel.

Jesus Christ, light of the world, you shine on every human being: enable us to discern your presence in each person.

Jesus Christ, friend of the poor: open in us the gates of simplicity so that we can welcome you.

Jesus Christ, gentle and humble of heart: renew in us the spirit of childhood.

Jesus Christ, you send your Church to prepare your path in the world: open for all people the gates of your Kingdom.

May the peace and love of the Creator be ours; the peace and love of Christ be ours, the peace and love of the Spirit be ours, as we journey inward during this season of reflection. Amen

Isaiah 40:9-11

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'
See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

Isaiah 52:7-9

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings
good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.' Listen! Your sentinels lift
up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion.

Genesis 3:8-15

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and
the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the
garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the
sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' He said, 'Who
told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to
eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I
ate.' Then the LORD God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The
serpent tricked me, and I ate.' The LORD God said to the serpent,
'Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.
I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.'

Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

Genesis 15:1-6

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your
shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I
continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have
given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' But the word of

the LORD came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Deuteronomy 18:15-19

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: 'If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.' Then the LORD replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.

Psalms 89:1-4

I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, for ever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.
I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

You said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:
"I will establish your descendants for ever,
and build your throne for all generations." '

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

Micah 5:2-3

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

Zechariah 6:12-13

say to him: Thus says the LORD of hosts: Here is a man whose name is Branch: for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD. It is he that shall build the temple of the LORD; he shall bear royal honour, and shall sit and rule on his throne. There shall be a priest by his throne, with peaceful understanding between the two of them.

Malachi 3:1-6

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

John 1:1-8

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

John 1:9-18

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Mark 1:1-3

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ',

Luke 1:5-25

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

Luke 1:39-80

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.'

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty saviour for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Isaiah 7:10-139

Again, the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.'

On that day the LORD will whistle for the fly that is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. And they will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the clefts of the rocks, and on all the thorn bushes, and on all the pastures.

On that day the Lord will shave with a razor hired beyond the River—with the king of Assyria—the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off the beard as well.

On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey.

On that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briars and thorns. With bow and arrows one will go there, for all the land will be briars and thorns; and as for all the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not go there for fear of briars and thorns; but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread.

Luke 1:26-35

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:
'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Matthew 2:1-2

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.'

Luke 2:21-35

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and

to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'