

MATTHEW 1:18-25  
OF ROYAL DESCENT...

When should you put your Christmas tree up? What about the other decorations? I was having this conversation with some friends the other day and there were different opinions! Some said December 24<sup>th</sup>, but that got a “bah! Humbug!” reaction. None of them have their tree up already, but there are people in their street who do! The lights are on the tree; there are lights outside! We’re not out of November yet! When do you start sending Christmas cards? We have a friend: it used to be that her card arrived on our mat on December 1<sup>st</sup>, so she must have sent them before the end of November; it was always a sign for us that the Christmas season had begun when Marion’s card arrived. I saw this photo on the screen the other day; it is great to see the city lit up like that; otherwise Edinburgh is just a grey November place. The preparations for these Christmas lights in Edinburgh probably began when they took last year’s lights down! The Church Christmas tree will go up in a couple of weeks time before we do our particular Christmas events and that will make the place look special and different.

Today, we light the first Advent candle; the season of Advent begins today, as we look forward to celebrating the coming of Jesus. Over the next few weeks we light the others and then on Christmas Day we will light the white candle to celebrate the coming of Jesus, the light of the world. Advent also asks us to look forward to Jesus’ other coming, His second coming and we have reflected a little on that earlier in the autumn: Jesus told these stories to encourage His friends to be ready for His coming again, this time in power and trailing clouds of glory. So we look forward. But Advent also invites us to look back, to the time leading up to Jesus’ coming, to what went on before, to the preparation time. When did these preparations start? When did God start to prepare for His Son to come into the world? When did God start to prepare the world for Jesus to come? Jesus’ coming was not a random event in the history of the world, but something that God had planned for generations and we see some marks of that plan today; we see the big picture of God’s mission to save the world; there are three marks of that preparation to see today. There is a family tree; there is a promise; there is a dream.

**The Family Tree:** we’ve already talked a little about family trees this morning. We’ve done a little research into our own family history; I come from a long line of Lanarkshire miners, which maybe explains some things about me. There are certainly no millionaires, no aristocracy or no kings; not yet anyway! But this is who I am; my family tree roots me in a place – one side of my family spent their whole past in the Clyde Valley area of Lanarkshire, which is where I grew up; the other side has roots in Perthshire, in Leith and in Edinburgh! My family tree also roots me in a people – this is my family, like it or not and I can’t change it; I am product of that family, my genetic history, my upbringing; in part at least, my family tree makes me who I am. There have been some surprises and a few shocks along way, but there is nothing we can do to change it; this is who we are. It is the same for all of us; maybe you’ve seen some people on the TV series *Who do you think you are?* and some have been delighted to find out about their family; others have been reduced to tears to think that people they never met, people they never even knew existed till then, lived such poor, struggling lives; they are connected by blood and genes, by a family tree.

The first part of Matthew’s gospel is Jesus’ family tree. Joseph gave Jesus His name; he accepted Jesus as his son; here is his family tree through Joseph. This does for Jesus what our family trees do for us; it connects Jesus to His ancestry. Jesus has an ancestry and Matthew carefully divides it up into three sets of fourteen

generations and so we know the people to whom Jesus is connected, There are some famous names: David, Solomon and Abraham; there are some dodgy individuals: Rahab was a prostitute and some of kings like Manasseh wandered away from God and were awful; but these were the people to whom Jesus was connected. This is the first part of God's preparing for Jesus' coming: every name is a footstep in the mission of God to save the world; every person a step nearer to the coming of Jesus. Here is Jesus, the Son of God, with real human ancestry, a real human past, a real human connection to the world; He comes to our world to be one of us and one with us.

**The Promise:** Matthew tells us that "*all this...*" (*Matthew 1:24*) He quotes from Isaiah 7:14: "*Therefore the...*" (*Isaiah 7:14*) There is a conversation between God and king Ahaz and God wants Ahaz to ask for a sign, but the king refuses and God says "I will give you a sign anyway". It seems meant as a reassurance to Ahaz that God is with His people and will rescue them, but the king seems reluctant to accept it and the mood changes. I've read the conversation a few times and am still not sure what it is all about. For Matthew, Jesus is the One who makes this promise come completely true. No child born in the 700 years between had been given this title in the way that it was given to Jesus; He is truly "God with us" and God prepared the way for Jesus' coming by the promise He gave to Isaiah. Sometimes, we discover that Old Testament prophecies come true on different levels and it would be true that God was with Ahaz, but only in Jesus did the promise come completely true. For 700 years, faithful people in Israel were looking for a virgin to have a child and be the One who would come with the title Immanuel; they found Him when Jesus came. The promise is another step in God's preparing for Jesus.

**The Dream:** You feel for Joseph; he's caught up in events that he doesn't understand. He's a good man and doesn't want to hurt Mary unnecessarily, but it seems that he just doesn't understand what is going on. She's pregnant and has told him the story of the angel coming to visit and how this is God's son and he has to work out whether he believes her or not! "*After he...*" (*Matthew 1:20f*) Is he convinced? Well, yes he is convinced! The dream he is given persuades him that God is indeed in this and Mary's baby is indeed the Saviour of the World and that he has a part to play in this. His part: "*he gave...*" (*Matthew 1:25*) The child has a name; the child has a legal status because Joseph gives Him a name. The dream was the third step in God preparing the way for Jesus' coming; everything is in place and the time has come and the child is born. The dream confirmed things; the dream made things clear and Joseph trusted God! The family tree, the promise and now the dream – three steps by which God prepared for His mission to the world in sending Jesus.

These three steps earth the story of Jesus in the real world. He has a history: Jesus didn't just land on planet earth as some extra-terrestrial being from outer space like Superman and we had to work out who He is; Jesus came with a history, a human history. He is of royal blood: his blood-line goes back through the kings of Israel, some of them good, some of them not; you can't choose your grandparents! The promise is part of that God-given past, a promise made generations before; God is at work in this situation. He has a real family: Mary is his mother and he was born to her in every normal way and Joseph takes the son home as his own and gives Him a name; Joseph says "he is mine!" There would be others in his family too, brothers certainly, to form the family of which Jesus is a part. Jesus lives in the real world; His story takes place in the real world, in our world, in the world in which we live and of which we have a part. There is something important about that!

Let's finish today by reflecting a little on Immanuel: God with us. Three little words, but full of meaning for us; this is what God has done.

**God:** in Jesus God has come to world. It is right to talk about Jesus' history and such like, but to understand Him fully we need to grasp that He is also God. In Colossians 1, Paul reflects on who Jesus is and comes up with all kinds of grand titles, each one of them almost a sermon in its own right; take a look at these verses again when you go home and ask yourself "how big is Jesus?" *"He is..." (Colossians 1:15)* says the very first of these: we can't see God, but Jesus is His image and Jesus reveals God to us and to the world. Do you want to see what God looks like? Then look at Jesus. Do you want to see the character of God, then look at Jesus; it is as simple as that. When Jesus was born, this is not just the simple story of the birth of a child, lovely and great as that may be; when Jesus was born the eternal God who created the universe came into our world. *"The One who strode among the stars, And called each one by name, Lies helpless in a mother's arms And must learn to walk again."* (Kendrick)

**With:** Where is God? The popular answer to that question is that He is "somewhere out there... if He exists at all!" God is remote, distant; He watches us from a distance and just doesn't get involved in our lives or in our world. He may not even be interested! But Jesus changes all of that. Jesus is God with us; God is here; God has lived on this planet; the God who made universe and who holds all of time and eternity and space in His hands, has lived with us, has been amongst us; everything that is "God" lived amongst us in Jesus. After He left, Jesus gave us His Spirit; the Spirit is the "life-breath of the exalted Jesus!" (Milne) Jesus is still with us here and now by His Spirit; He has not really ever gone away. He is God with us.

**Us:** we are the 'us'! We can imagine that Jesus would be with the elite; if there is some kind of religious elite, then we can imagine Jesus be with them and they live in some super-spiritual ivory tower, untouched by the world and life is perfect; but us – we are mere mortals, our life is too messy, we are not good enough for that privilege. Here's the thing: Jesus is God with us; we are the 'us'! Our world is messy, tough at times, great at other times; our lives are a bit mixed, we get some things right, but get other things wrong and we never seem to learn. If only our faith were perfect, then Jesus would be with us! But we are the "us" and Jesus is with us; with us in our messy world, with us in our upside down lives; with us when life is tough; with us when things are great. He is with us and He is able to help us and bless us. We are the "us"!

"God with us" – Immanuel! God had planned this for generations; He had been preparing for this day and every part of the family tree is a footstep nearer; the promise of a virgin having a child, Immanuel; Joseph had a dream to reassure him. These are God's preparations for the coming of Jesus! This is God's mission to save the world. Advent helps us look forward to Christmas, but also makes us look back to the ways in which God has been at work; this is Plan A and there is no plan B! Plan A saves the world, gives us a Saviour in Jesus and is God with us. There are so many challenges to that faith and to that truth today; "this is just a fairy story to keep you calm!" But it is a real story, in real time and history, in the real past; God is really present in the world in Jesus; Jesus really is God with us; He is really present with us now; He really is able to save us completely. Stand firm in that real faith and carry on – carry on believing, loving, trusting, serving. Jesus is God with us – still!