

MATTHEW 1:18-25
BETHLEHEM NOT BRIGADOON

Gene Kelly was arguably Hollywood's greatest song and dance man; the star of *Singing in the Rain* and so many other big musicals. There was a story last month of Gene Kelly visiting Glasgow; this is a picture of him outside Central Station. He came to Scotland looking for Brigadoon, or rather for a film location where they could make the movie that would become *Brigadoon*. The Scottish weather got in the way, it was too wet! MGM decided that the movie should be made in Hollywood on a stage set, rather than on location in Scotland. Kelly came to Scotland looking for Brigadoon, but sadly didn't find it! *Brigadoon* is a movie that makes your toes curl, being Scottish kitsch of the first degree. The story: Brigadoon is a fictional village that appears out of the Scottish mist on only one day in every hundred years. Two Americans on a hunting trip in Scotland become lost and they come across this small village, which is not on the map, in which people harbour a mysterious secret, and behave as if they were still living two hundred years in the past. Lerner and Loewe turned this story into musical on Broadway, then in London, and Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse starred in the movie version. Brigadoon doesn't exist in at least two ways!

Some people will tell you that the Christian Christmas story is like Brigadoon; it is made up, it tells you about people who never existed and is all a bit of a fantasy to make us feel good, alongside the all other made-up stories that we have in our culture. Some will tell you that "religion is a fairy story made up for people who are afraid of the dark, to make them feel better." (Stephen Hawking and others) So, are we on the same level as Brigadoon? Is this a story that gets dragged out every year to tell again a fantasy about a baby and angels and shepherds and a virgin birth, all because we need something to make us feel good at Christmas? Are we in Brigadoon, a place we can't find, but makes us feel good anyway? John Lennox counters this by telling us "that atheism is a fantasy made up for people who are afraid of the light!" Take your pick

Our story takes place in Bethlehem. You can find Bethlehem on the map; it is a real place. It has existed for hundreds of years, has a real history and has a real story; it still exists today and you can go to visit it if you want; it is a troubled place. It is not the most important place on the planet, not even the most important place in Israel, but it does exist and the whole story of Jesus is placed not only in the geography of Bethlehem, but in real time, surrounded by real events. When people tell you that Bible stories are all made up, these are people who have simply bought into a popular attempt to discredit the story; they have not looked at the facts, nor the scholarship, nor the story in any detail. Today we look for Bethlehem; let's see what we find.

Bethlehem is a real place. Jesus is born in the real world. Jesus can be placed in a real place at a real time in history. We talked about some of the real people who lived there and who had called it home before Jesus came along, who are part of His history. Why does this matter? Jesus is the Saviour in the real world! Bethlehem also a troubled place: you need only to see the wall to realise just how hard life is for people in Bethlehem today: everywhere they go is regulated; everything they do is regulated; they are surrounded by the wall to keep them away from Jewish places; so the people of Bethlehem struggle to live their real lives; it is far from easy; the place at the heart of our story is not only a real place, but a place where the real people who live there find life really hard.

Why does this matter? Hebrews 2 talks about Jesus becoming one of us, sharing out humanity, living in our real world. He is the Son of God, whose coming is heralded by angels, who has come to live in our world, our neighbourhood; who has come to share our life. He comes to save us and can only do that by being human, sharing our world, and sharing our life. Jesus is not some alien spacemen who came down to the planet surface to visit us from outer space and leave some kind of alien present behind! Jesus has been part of our world,

shared our humanity, has lived, suffered, died and was raised, part of our world to save our world.

He was not even immune from the struggles we face. He wanted to do what God wants and His family thought He was mad. He tried to do what He thought was right, but He trod on the toes of those who had power and, so He was made to suffer; in the end He died at the hands of His enemies, at one level a miscarriage of justice, but at another level, Jesus dying for us to save us from our sins. The way to the cross is a terrible picture of one person's journey to die; He knows how we feel when we make that same journey alongside someone we love, or when we make it for ourselves. This is the real world in which we live; Jesus shares our humanity and walks with us; He understands our real world and brings grace and hope to help us.

We're not in Brigadoon; we're not in some fantasy world that gets dragged out every Christmas to make us feel good for a few days and then we sink back to reality. No! Our story takes place in Bethlehem, a real place on a map, with a real history; a troubled place where the people who live there struggle because their real lives are hard. I thank God for that because that means that my real life, in the place where I live and in the struggles I face, I have a Saviour who knows me and understands me. I was born on Saturday 5th October 1957 in the Wm Smellie Hospital, Lanark, the son of George and Betty Dewar of 204 Lanark Rd, Hazelbank. Who are you? I love idea that Jesus could say something similar, born in Bethlehem, the son of Joseph and Mary; we don't know more details and it doesn't matter. This is not a fairy story made up to help us when we're afraid of the dark; this is a real life story told to lead us to Jesus, the Saviour for us and for the world; He is someone who knows us, someone to trust, someone who is able to help us, and save us, and answer our prayers. This is Bethlehem not Brigadoon!

From humble beginnings...

What did your great-grandfather do? You have four of them, so there are four answers. Here are mine:

John Stewart – a farm steward in Perthshire and Peebles
Peter Henderson – a commercial traveller living in Leith
George Dewar – a coal miner living in Carluke
James Watson – a coalminer living in Crossford

Do you have any royalty in your family tree? Are you descended from anyone important in history? My father was a time-served blacksmith who spent his working life hitting things with a big hammer! My mother was a district nurse. I was the first member of my family to go to university and only because the government paid my fees and gave me a grant. In my family tree there are coal miners; there are people who went to sea and people who worked land. I am not descended from William the Conqueror or Robert the Bruce, as far as I know!

Jesus' great-grandfather is a man called Matthan of whom we know nothing, but here are some other people in Jesus' family tree:

- Rachel, was the wife of Jacob, the mother of Joseph, who died in childbirth with Benjamin; she is buried on the way to Bethlehem.
- Rahab, a prostitute from the story of Jericho, had found her way to Bethlehem.
- Ruth, a foreigner from Moab, came to live in Bethlehem with her mother-in-law and found love in Boaz, the son of Rahab; their story takes place in Bethlehem.
- David, their great-grandson was a shepherd boy who became a king; the greatest king Israel ever had; his home town is Bethlehem, the city of David.
- 600 or 700 years before Jesus, the prophet Micah tells the people that a new King will come from Bethlehem.

Not all of these are important people, not all of the people in Jesus' family tree have a good life; some are kings, but not all are good kings; some are foreigners. All of these people, in one way or another, are in Jesus' family tree; they are footsteps in God's plan for the Messiah.

So 700 years later, the Roman governor passes a decree to create a census and in a small town, out of the way, the village carpenter reads this decree and gathers his new, pregnant wife and their belongings and travels the seventy or so miles south to Bethlehem to register for this census and while they are there, the child is born. Joseph has to take Mary to Bethlehem because he is descended from David.

Joseph is the village carpenter in the out-of-the-way place called Nazareth; his fiancée has told him that she is pregnant and that this is something God has done. Joseph is confused, understandably so. He has a dream in which an angel spoke to him and reassured him – everything is OK; trust God, trust Mary. He does and the baby is born and there is this telling sentence at the end of the reading: *"He (Joseph) gave him the name Jesus!"* It is the father's job to give the child his name; Joseph does that.

Where do the wise men expect to find the king? In the palace. They go to Jerusalem, and to Herod's palace, because that's where you find kings, but that's not where they find Jesus. It throws Herod into confusion – "king, there is no king here!!" The books tell his advisors that the king will be born in Bethlehem, which is not far away, but...

This is the coming of the Son of God, the greatest person who ever walked on the surface of this planet. This is the One of whom it is said that He made everything that is and that He is centre of the universe and the A-Z of everything – His coming into world is described in the story of Joseph, the carpenter, a man who for a time is full of doubts, whose faith in two minds what to do. He is coming to town called Bethlehem. These are humble beginnings and Jesus would go on to live humbly, to serve people in need, to die on a cross and then be raised, though not everyone would be sure even of that. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the greatest person ever. This is His story, these people, this place. Jesus has come to save us.