

**Matthew 1:18-25**  
**Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool**

It is the biggest selling Christmas single never to reach number 1. Over one million copies were sold but, in 1984, nothing was going to know "Do they know it's Christmas" off the top spot. In fact George Michael donated the £250,000 royalties from the song to the Ethiopia famine appeal to show his support. If you haven't worked out what the song is yet I'm sure you'll recognise the lyrics from your Christmas shopping experiences...

*Once bitten and twice shy,  
I keep my distance but you still catch my eye  
Tell me baby, do you recognize me?  
Well it's been a year;  
It doesn't surprise me.*

*Last Christmas I gave you my heart  
But the very next day you gave it away  
This year, to save me from tears  
I'll give it to someone special*

*I wrapped it up and sent it  
With a note saying "I love you"  
I meant it  
Now I know what a fool I've been  
But if you kissed me now I know you'd fool me  
again*

OK so the lyrics are pretty ropey. And, for those of you who remember the video the knitwear was even worse – you may remember George and Andrew in their furry hoods!

But there's no doubt, is there, that the legacy of broken promises in our lives is real and unpleasant. And whether it's that amazing looking present under the tree when you were 7 that turned out to be a pair of wellies, the teenage Christmas date where you got stood up or the annual Christmas trip to see first mum, then dad, which is a constant reminder of family heartbreak, Christmas time is very often a painful reminder of our world of broken dreams.

In the light of that put yourself, for a minute, in Joseph's shoes this evening.

As far as we can tell Joseph just discovered that Mary was pregnant, in the way that you would. Probably he began to notice that Mary was putting on a little bit of weight. He was, I am sure, a polite man and restrained himself from saying anything - maybe it was just a case of a few slices of cake too many on Mary's part? But then, when the appearance of pregnancy became unmistakable Joseph realised what was going on.

He must have felt absolutely sickened. How could the woman who had pledged herself to him in marriage do this to him?

To help us understand just how gut wrenchingly, heart-breakingly awful it must have felt for Joseph we need to understand that in Joseph's day engagement was not just a nice social convention designed to enable the committed boyfriend to buy his girlfriend a nice ring and show how serious he was.

2,000 years ago engagement was the first part of marriage. As we learn in v19 the only way that an engagement could be dissolved was by getting a divorce. During the engagement the bride and groom might still lived in their family homes with their parents. They didn't sleep together, but engagement was a real commitment. If you slept with someone else while you were engaged you were an adulterer.

And Mary was pregnant. Joseph would have felt utterly betrayed. His bride had broken her solemn promises to him before she had even moved into his home. Mary, hard though it must have seemed to him to believe, knowing the character of the woman he was engaged to, had been sleeping with someone else.

It's hardly the most promising start to a Christmas sermon is it? It seems at odds with the songs we've just been singing. Perhaps you're feeling a bit cheated having come out for a nice evening of carols and jollity that I'm talking about a bit of the Bible that seems to begin with a broken promise.

Well the wonder of Matthew's account in these verses is that what appears at first to be a broken promise, is actually a promise kept.

What starts off looking like personal disaster for Joseph turns out to be the best news in the world – and not only for Joseph, but for everyone.

This is a story about promises. Most of all it's about God's faithfulness to keep his promises, which are the best news you will ever hear in a world full of broken dreams and broken promises.

To help us see just how amazing God's faithfulness to his promises is we, like Joseph, need to be clear that this was no ordinary birth.

That's why God goes out of his way to reveal to Joseph that in thinking that Mary has been unfaithful to her promises he has come to the **wrong** conclusion, however natural a conclusion that might have been.

Joseph was a righteous man. He was a man who considered that God's law was very important. And Joseph knew what the law said. He knew he could not go through with a marriage to a woman who had committed adultery.

On the other hand Joseph was also a merciful man; he did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace.

Well it seems that Joseph concluded that there was only one solution. He and Mary would have a quiet divorce. This was perfectly legal; all you needed were two discreet people as witnesses. And then something extraordinary happened...

Joseph had a dream. A dream in which an angel, a messenger, of God himself appeared to him (a fairly unusual occurrence even in the Bible) and revealed to Joseph that his *natural* conclusions were *incorrect* conclusions.

The baby that was developing in Mary's womb was not the result of her unfaithfulness but of God's faithfulness. The conception of this child came about not in the usual way but by a miraculous working of God the Holy Spirit in Mary, the result of which would be to fulfil God's ancient promises in history in a way that would change the world forever.

Many people in our world, including, perhaps, some people who are here this evening, find it very hard indeed to believe that they can trust God. Perhaps you have had some experience or been through some episode in your life that, for one reason or another, has been the trigger for you rejecting God's goodness or even, perhaps, his very existence. Maybe you remember the events of last Christmas when 250,000 people died on Boxing Day. People who were on what was meant to be the holiday of lifetime or who were just going about trying to make a living. Maybe you know someone like my friend Bob who, just a week ago today, died of a particularly unpleasant cancer. Or perhaps you just feel weighed down by the burdens and struggles of life.

Well can I suggest to you this evening that, in the end, our reason for feeling that we cannot trust God is **not** because of our experiences. Some of the people I know, like Bob, who have been through the most terrible experiences have had their convictions about God's trustworthiness and goodness strengthened rather than weakened as a result.

What we need is to understand rightly what God **has** promised and why those promises are the best news in the world.

Both of God's kept promises here are expressed in relation to names that will be given to the child Mary's bears.

The first promise relates to the name **Jesus**. Joseph is commanded by God, through the angel, to call the child Jesus, because, v21 there, he will save his people from their sins.

During 2004 one enterprising American couple decided to name their baby boy Ikea. I couldn't help wondering if he came in a flat pack?! I can't see it catching on!

Josuha, however remained steady at number 2 most popular name on both sides of the Atlantic. The name Jesus is just a translation of the name Joshua. And it means, literally, *God saves* or *the Lord rescues* and there are at least four different people named Joshua in the Bible. But with this Joshua; Jesus Christ, the name takes on a whole new meaning. This time it isn't God who saves in some general sense. It's not that Jesus is being named optimistically in the hope that things will turn out OK...

*In 1958 a New York City man named Robert Lane decided to call his baby son Winner. The Lanes, who lived in a housing project in Harlem, already had several children, each with a fairly typical name. But this boy – well, Robert Lane apparently had a special feeling about this one. Winner Lane: how could he fail with a name like that?*

*Three years later, the Lanes had another baby boy, their seventh and last child. For reasons that no one can quite pin down today, Robert decided to name this boy loser. It doesn't appear that Robert was unhappy about the new baby; he just seemed to get a kick out of the name's bookend effect. First a Winner, now a Loser. But if Winner Lane could hardly be expected to fail, could Loser Lane possibly succeed?*

*Loser Lane did in fact succeed. He went to prep school on a scholarship, graduated from Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, and joined New Your Police Department, where he made detective and, eventually, sergeant.*

*And what of his brother? The most noteworthy achievement of Winner Lane, now in his late forties, is the sheer length of his criminal record: nearly three dozen arrests for burglary, domestic violence, trespassing, resisting arrest and other mayhem.*

### **Steven Levitt, Freakonomics, p179-180.**

The name that God tells Joseph to give to the child is not an optimistic wish in the air but a startling factual statement. A statement about our world, about God's intentions and about Jesus' rescue. It's a startling statement because it tells us that...

Jesus will save his people **from their sins**.

Jesus' people are not going to be distinguished by being cleverer, richer or better than anyone else. In fact the people God rescues through Jesus will be just the same as everybody else – sinful.

Perhaps this evening some of us have never accepted this basic truth about the planet we live on. That everybody is sinful. That everybody has failed to love God with all our being and to love other people as ourselves. The promises of God that are kept in Jesus will never make any sense to us without that truth in place.

Many who have decided that they cannot trust God were looking to him for salvation from unemployment, depression, loneliness, sickness or any one of a hundred things that afflict the human race. But the mission of Jesus, the promise that he comes to keep, is not to deal with any of those symptoms, but to deal with the world's most fundamental problem.

Many of the things that we think we need saving from – from the (relatively) trivial issue of the January Visa bill to the very worst and most heart rending horrors of the world are simply surface reflections of a far deeper problem that lies buried in your heart and mine – the problem of sin.

Sin – rejection of God that separates us from him. Rejection of God that puts us under his right judgment – and results in death for everybody. Self-centredness that results in countless billions of acts of cruelty, thoughtlessness and neglect between people. Our problem is sin. And the mission of Jesus is to save his people, that is anyone who puts their trust in him, from their sins.

How will he do that? Well there's a clue in the angels' own words. The angel says this child is to be called "God saves." But then he tells Joseph that Jesus will save his people from their sins.

Jesus can save his people from their sins because he is not simply God's saviour, God's rescuer – he is God himself. The God who is the object of our rejection. The God whose just judgment we ought to face, is coming himself to rescue his people.

If you want to find out how God can do that you need to read on in the gospels from the story of Christmas to the story of Easter – where you will discover that Jesus, the God-man, saves his people by taking upon himself, on a Roman cross, the penalty of death and judgement that we deserve.

In Jesus God keeps his promise to save people from their sins. And **in Jesus God keeps his promise to be with his people always.**

600 years before Jesus was born the prophet Isaiah, whose words are quoted here, in v23 announced God's solution to the problem of sin: *"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel."*

God's solution is a new king for his people. A king who is descended from the great King David himself. But a king who will always reign perfectly and never die. A king who is divine. A king who is God – with us – for that is what Immanuel means. 600 years before Jesus was born the divine king, descended from David, born of a virgin, was promised.

And as the angel spoke to Joseph, a few short months before the first Christmas, that promise was being kept.

For as Jesus saves from judgment and sin everyone who puts their trust in him he also makes us right with God.

The passage we are looking at this evening comes from Matthew's gospel. And right at the end of Matthew's account of Jesus life, Jesus, risen from the dead to live forever, sends his followers out with a mission.

A mission to take the good news about him to the ends of the earth. It was a mission that for those who heard it would involve hardship, financial deprivation, dangerous travel, persecution and death. As well as all the regular tragedies of living in a messed up world in rebellion against its creator – diseases, family troubles, economic downturns, cancer and depression.

But he also promised that he would be with them. That he would be present by their side until the ages should end. Jesus' promises did not instantly solve all their problems by any means.

But at the end of their lives – some brutally murdered during the first few years of the Christian church, others suffering decades later under Roman persecution and one living out his last days as an elderly man exiled on a prison island – at the end of their lives, not one of those people, or billions of others who have followed Jesus since, would swap those promises for all the treasures of this world.

If you are here tonight because you were invited by a Christian friend why not ask them about that afterwards? Get them to explain to you why they wouldn't swap the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus for the world's best car, the most perfect family or the biggest end of year bonus your company has ever paid out.

In Jesus Christ God keeps his promises to forgive sin, rescue people and be with them always.

The birth of Christ is a signpost in the sand, a marker of the unalterable faithfulness of God to his promises.

And in a world of broken dreams God keeping his promises of rescue and his presence through Jesus is the best news you will ever hear.

The promise of Jesus is to save anyone who will trust in him, from our sin. To be God with us. Knowing and experiencing the truth of those promises is the greatest privilege and joy in all the world.

That is why Christmas matters. So this evening if you know that rescue through Jesus. If you have put your trust in him and are one of his people then rejoice and be glad that God is faithful to keep his promises.

And if you do not know that salvation, then take a step to find out about it this Christmas.

Amidst the tinsel, the baubles, the food and drink, the discarded wrapping paper, the family fun (and rows), why not give yourself a priceless gift? A couple of hours to read one of the accounts of Jesus life.

Why not sign up to come along to our short course, Christianity Explored? An opportunity to thoroughly investigate the person and claims of Jesus and ask your most rigorous and challenging questions about him.

Whatever you do this Christmas don't ignore the best news in the world.

*Andrew Evans  
December 2005*