

Messiah puts a face to the name

The birth of Jesus

Choosing a name for a baby can be challenging. You're trying to avoid potential banana skins, like unfortunate initials. More positively, you want a name that means something, a name they can live up to. When our third child was born, we initially went for 'Jamie'. But having seen him, we began to like 'Toby'. In the end we couldn't decide so rather unconventionally we asked our Facebook friends to settle the matter in a vote. Apologies if you are a Jamie but our third child is very much Toby. In the ancient world, the pressure must have felt even greater. To name a person was to declare something prophetically over their lives. Their name was intimately connected to their spiritual *identity* (who I am) and their sense of *destiny* (what I will become).

Fortunately for Joseph and Mary, when it came to naming the Messiah, the pressure was taken off. An angelic visitation removed any need for a vote:

An angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream and said . . . '[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us').

Matthew 1:20–3

The appearance of angels in the Bible is always significant. The Greek word *angelos* means 'messenger'. They are sent from heaven when there is major news to announce to earth. In the nativity accounts, heaven's special agents appear to a most unlikely collection of individuals: a teenage virgin Mary, her rather bruised fiancé Joseph, a gang of rough shepherds and Zechariah, a dumb-struck priest in the temple. The unprecedented flurry of angelic activity is a sure sign that the most decisive moment in the entire Bible is unfolding. And the clue is in two crucial names that the angel declared over the Bethlehem babe.

First, 'Immanuel', which means 'God with us'. In some mysterious way, Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God's divine presence. In the Old Testament, there were plenty of temporary manifestations – the burning bush for Moses, the glory cloud that engulfed Solomon's temple for instance. But how much of God can you really know from a bush or a cloud? These dramatic manifestations were still *God above us*, several steps removed. However, the angel's message is that a woman is about to give birth to the very presence that had animated the bush and the cloud.

John's Gospel captures the idea in an iconic phrase: 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' (John 1:14). Or as *The Message* version puts it: 'The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.' The staggering claim is that if you want to know what God is like, look no further. No better way could be imagined for humans to know God than for God to become a human. *Immanuel* is our

way to experience God up close and personal. He is not whatever we've imagined him to be. God is like Jesus – pure and simple. At the burning bush, God revealed his name to Moses. Now Jesus puts a face to the name. As America pastor Bill Johnson says: 'Jesus Christ is perfect theology.'⁷ Everything there is to know about God has been revealed in him.

Theologians refer to this as the 'incarnation'. The Latin word *carne* means 'meat' or 'flesh' – like chilli-*con-carne*, chilli with meat. So God *in-carne* means 'God in the flesh', 'God in human form'. My favourite carol puts it this way:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
hail th' incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus our Immanuel.

As an inexperienced parent, when our children woke scared in the night I used to try and reason with them: 'Look under the bed, there are no monsters . . . check the wardrobe if you don't believe me.' I soon learned that it wasn't logic they needed; I just had to sit on the bed and be *with* them. My presence was enough to restore peace. The Messiah is not an abstract philosophy that stays in the realm of ideas. He's Immanuel. God *with* us.

'Immanuel' was a prophetic title but the name that stuck for this boy from Nazareth was 'Jesus'. It's derived from an ancient Hebrew root pronounced *Yeshua*. As the angel said, it means 'the Lord saves'. The Hebrew verb to save (*yasha*) conveys the beautiful idea of being delivered from oppression and led into a wide open place. When you appreciate that *Yeshua* is the same as the name 'Joshua', it all falls into place. When Israel was oppressed in Egypt, Moses delivered them from under Pharaoh but Joshua led them into the Promised Land. So Jesus

is the new Joshua. He will break the power of oppression and lead us home to a spacious place. Jesus – what a beautiful name!

The promise of salvation through the Messiah was summed up in perhaps the most dramatic appearance of angels in the entire Bible:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them . . . [and said] ‘Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord’ . . . Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared . . . saying,

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.’

Luke 2:8–9, 11, 13–14

The arrival of a ‘Saviour’ and ‘Lord’ who brings peace sounds like religious language to us. But at that time the Romans ruled the world with an iron fist and Caesar Augustus called the shots. When he was born (c. 63 BC), Rome announced that he was the world’s true ‘Saviour’ and ‘Lord’ who would secure that most prized possession – peace. They referred to this as ‘*pax Romana*’ (the peace of Rome). The idea was simple: pay homage to Caesar, pay taxes to Rome, and you will be left in peace. Now listen to the angels’ announcement: right under the emperor’s nose the true ‘Saviour’ has been born. The one lying in the animal’s trough is in fact the world’s rightful ‘Lord’ who alone can bring ‘peace on earth’.

In this political context, the message of the angels was controversial. But who they announced it to was even more shocking. If you’ve ever been chosen to don a tea-towel and

play the part of a shepherd in your school nativity, I'm afraid it wasn't a compliment. In biblical times, shepherds were considered to be spiritually unclean and socially disreputable. And yet this group of undesirables was given the most dazzling display of angelic glory in the entire Bible. The message is clear: 'Jesus' means 'the Lord saves' and that means he can save anyone. In fact, Jesus became a magnet for those who would never consider themselves 'religious' – tax collectors, fishermen, soldiers and prostitutes. Those the religious leaders wrote off, Jesus welcomed in. Those who assumed they were beyond the pale, found God knocking at their door and those who assumed they had no need, missed out.

A few years ago, a famous historic mansion near where we lived opened its doors to the public on Christmas morning – a gesture of goodwill to those not normally allowed in. Afterwards, I got talking to a lady who turned out to be the Lady of the Manor. When she heard that I was minister of a church nearby she asked in a rather posh voice: 'Is it a church for the down-and-outs?' I was initially thrown by the premise of the question, but then a feeling of indignation rose up and I blurted out: 'Yes it is. And you would be very welcome too!' Before God, we are all down-and-outs. Because of Jesus, we are all invited in. He is *Immanuel*, God with us. He is *Jesus*, who delivers us into a spacious place.



READ: Matthew 1:18–25 and Luke 2:8–20.



REFLECT: Listen to the song 'What a Beautiful Name' (Hillsong Worship) or walk in a wide open space. Meditate on the significance for you of the Messiah's names: *Immanuel* – God with us; *Jesus* – the Lord saves.