Saviour and Judge
Matthew 1:18-25

We're already in the second Sunday of Advent! And Advent is this period before Christmas when traditionally the church looks back to Jesus' first coming and forward to his second. And today we're looking at Matthew's account of the announcement to Joseph, by the angel, that Mary, his fiancé is going to have a baby.

And if you're not yet a Christian, it might just be this account that can put the whole message of Christianity in doubt for you. Because you hear 'virgin birth' and think, 'There goes Christianity. Because if I have to believe in virgin conceptions and virgin births to be a Christian, that's Christianity out the window for me!' Because the only reason these guys believed it was that they were prescientific, they didn't know any better, but we do. And so to believe this today would be ridiculous.

But things may not be much better even if you are a Christian. Because your doubts about whether this actually happened can be like termites eating away at the foundations of a house - your doubts eat away at your faith. Because if the Bible's wrong on virgin births, what else is it wrong on?

And yet, the Bible unashamedly says Jesus was born of a virgin and what you need to see is that's not because Matthew or Mary or Joseph were prescientific and didn't know any better. Mary's response to being told she was going to have a baby was, 'well how is that going to happen? I'm a virgin!' And look how Joseph responds - v19: he 'resolved to divorce her quietly.' Why? Because if Mary's pregnant, and he knows *he* hasn't had sex with her, she must have been having sex with someone else.

So neither Mary, nor Joseph, nor Matthew who reports it just go, 'o, a virgin birth, of course, we're prescientific, that's fine!' They know where babies come from.

And it's the fact that they reacted the same way you react that should cause you to doubt your doubts. This was as out of this world for them as it is for you. And ask yourself, as Mary herself was challenged to consider, if there is a God, why would you think this would be impossible for him? Ask yourself, is it because you think God is like you?

But, of course, that's what so remarkable about this story, isn't it? Because it tells us that while God is totally unlike us, he became like us.

He Came as Saviour
Look at v20. The angel appears to Joseph and addresses him, "Joseph, son of David…" Why make the link back to his great ancestor David? I mean, when you meet someone you don't go, 'Hi John, the great-great-great-great grandson of Bert the Butcher', do you? Why remind him of his family tree? Because right now, Joseph isn't thinking about ancient history, is he? He's got other things on his mind. He's thinking about his current problems. Verse 20 again, 'As he considered these things'. His fiancé's pregnant and he knows it's not by him and he's working out what on earth to do about it.

So why take him back to his roots? Because he's telling him, Joseph, this event you're caught up in is much bigger than you. Your story is part of a far greater story, the story of the long promised Son of David. And God is weaving your story into the tapestry of that far greater story.

But think of your own story. Think of the stuff you're currently struggling with. Maybe it keeps you up at night like Joseph. Maybe like him this thing pre-occupies you. Or maybe like him you're facing something and you wonder what on earth the right thing to do is. But like Joseph, whether you realise it or not, you're also caught up in this far greater story. The story of what God is doing in the coming of Jesus. And it's by finding yourself in this story that you can find the strength and wisdom to face what you face in your own story.

You see, look what the angel says next, v20-21: "Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, *and you shall call his name Jesus*, for he will save his people from their sins."

And in Hebrew, Jesus is *Yeshua*, God saves. The Lord is salvation. But what do you think of when you think of being saved?

One winter after we first arrived here, we hired some rando skis for our girls who were then about 14, 12, 10 and 8, and dropped them off at the top of the Jura and told them to ski down, all off piste, through the forests and meet us at an agreed point at the bottom. And Su and I sat in the car, at the bottom, waiting. And waiting. And as time ticked by and the sun began to set I became increasingly anxious. Su, of course was as chilled as a freezer cabinet. And we kept looking up the hills thinking, surely they're going to come out of the trees any moment. But they didn't and the sun was still going down, and it was getting darker. And I could see it all. We'd have to call REGA, the rescue helicopter, to come and save them, and they'd have to use thermal imaging cameras to find them in the dark, and they'd get hypothermia, and lose all their fingers to frostbite, and it would be across all the newspapers, 'Children abandoned by negligent father saved by REGA.' And then, literally as dark was falling, they skied out of the last line of trees.

But that's what we think of when we think of being saved, isn't it. Someone's in trouble and we call on the rescue services to save them. It's how David spoke of God's salvation: 'O God, incline your ear to me; hear my words. Wondrously show your steadfast love, *O Saviour of those who seek refuge from their adversaries.*' (Ps 17:6-7). You're threatened by something, or you're facing some adversary, but God's your saviour, he'll rescue you, he'll pull you out of this.

But, of course, that adversary doesn't have to be physical. A couple of years ago, Erica Komisar, an American psychoanalyst, who's not a Christian, wrote an article in the Wall Street Journal entitled, *'Don't believe in God? Lie to your children.'* And she wrote, 'As a therapist, I'm often asked to explain why depression and anxiety are so common among children and adolescents. One of the most important explanations—and perhaps the most neglected—is declining interest in religion. This cultural shift already has proved disastrous for millions of vulnerable young people… Nihilism is fertiliser for anxiety and depression… The belief in God - in a protective and guiding figure to rely on when times are tough - is one of the best kinds of support for kids in an increasingly pessimistic world.'

But not just for kids. We all need a saviour from an increasingly pessimistic world. And you'll either try and save yourself from that - by fighting against it like a culture warrior, or by trying to ignore it by turning the news off, and hoping it goes away. Or you'll seek comfort in something else to fight the despair, like friends, or sport, or chocolate, or alcohol. But what Komisar is saying is, there's a far better way, a way that's been tested and tried over generations, and that's knowing that God *has* you safe, and *will keep you* safe. That he's your saviour from all the darkness of life.

And yet, when the angel tells Joseph, Jesus is coming as a saviour, he's not thinking in terms of human or even psychological adversaries. Verse 21 again, "He will save his people *from their sins*."

Which means, if we need saving from our sins, our sins must be bad news. They must be our adversary; the real threat we're facing. They must be like getting lost in the mountains in winter at night. They must be like being out of your depth in the sea, with the tide pulling you out and down. They must be like you lying injured and broken after falling from a mountain path.

And at one level we know that's true, don't we? When some sin, or some pattern of wrong behaviour gets a hold of you or someone you love, and it's out of control, and it's just bringing darkness and hurt, you would welcome someone pulling you out of that, because you know you can't do it yourself. And the angel says to Joseph, that's what this boy is coming to do. He's coming to save his people from their sins.

And yet, there's another side to this. And that's that the Bible tells us that it's not just that our sins offend against *us*, it's that they offend against God. And if the announcement that we can be saved from our sins is good news, that's because the bad news is that what we really need saving from is not ourselves, but the endless alienation from God we deserve for walking away from him.

He Will Come as Judge

Look what Jesus says later in Matthew's gospel, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." (Matt 25:31-32)

So the angel tells us Jesus has come to save us from our sins, but Jesus himself tells us that when he comes again he will judge people *because of* their sin.

But what does that leave you feeling? You see, the problem is we can like the idea of Jesus' first coming, and being saved from the darkness of the world and being given hope. And we like the idea of being rescued when our lives are spinning out of control and being put back in control. But we can be much less keen on him coming again because of the judgment he says he'll bring. I mean think about it, how much does anyone like being told that the way they're living is wrong and they're going to be judged for it? In today's secular culture the idea that someone's behaviour *could be*, let alone *should be,* judged is viewed as deeply intolerant.

And yet, if we're honest, we're conflicted about this; about this issue of justice and judgment. Because we also don't like the idea that abusers or those who have hurt or exploited others just get away with it. In fact, in an age which says, 'you can't judge me', people express a deep desire for justice, even for retribution. The problem is, because our culture no longer believes in a final judgement, they have to bring that judgment forward into this life and get their retribution now. We want people to pay for their sins now. Which is one reason why our societies are so polarised and , frankly, judgmental. People must be condemned in this life, because there isn't another one.

But what does all that tell you? It's that for all our tolerance, we still want justice and still think people should pay for their sins. It's just we want justice on our terms. We want there to be an accounting, it's just we want it to be others who have to give it. We want people to face the

consequences of their sin, we just don't want it to be us who face the consequences of our sins. We want judgement on our terms and the bar set at a level where we and our friends get in.

But what if when the angel says, 'Jesus will save his people from their sins', he doesn't just mean our psychological darkness, or when our lives are spinning out of control, but from *all* our sins? The sins that explain *why* the world can be the dark place it can be. The sins that leave our relationship with God and others broken. The sins that leave us under his judgment. What if Jesus really is both saviour and judge?

He is Immanuel - God with Us.
Look at v22, where Matthew says, 'All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us.)'

And the context of that prophecy was that around 730BC Jerusalem was threatened by enemy armies. And the people were afraid and needed saving. And through Isaiah, God calls Ahaz, King of Judah, to not look to the military might of Assyria, the superpower, to deliver them, but to trust God - that God will save them. And God offers Ahaz a sign to prove he won't let him down. But Ahaz refuses, not because he's a great man of faith, but because he's already decided what he wants to do. He's looking to Assyria. And so Isaiah says, 'ok, well, God's going to give you a sign anyway. A virgin will conceive and bear a son, and before he's grown up those enemies of yours will be destroyed. But know this, Ahaz, whichever way you turn, God's promise remains: Immanuel - God is with his people to save them.'

But Ahaz still turned to Assyria, and Assyria did come to his rescue. But in turn Assyria subjugated and dominated Judah.

And Matthew's saying, that's the point: *our sin* is the enemy that threatens *us*, like these foreign armies threatened Ahaz. And just like Ahaz, we need saving. But just like Ahaz, we look everywhere else, to all these other powers, to save us. When life feels empty, we try and find fulfilment in work, or relationships, or possessions, but make any of those your ultimate and they end up possessing you. When life feels out of control, we try and save ourselves through self-help programs, but either they don't work, and we end up feeling more lost, or they do but now it's the program that controls us. Or we realise we're distant from God, and so try harder to live a moral life and earn his favour, but either we keep failing and his favour's elusive, or we think we've succeeded and earned it, and then pride grows. And so none of these solve the fundamental problem of why we can be empty or life can be dark, which is alienation from God our heavenly Father.

But it's into that emptiness and darkness that Christ comes as Immanuel, God with us. You see, Joseph is sat there, thinking, 'Mary's pregnant and some other guy's the father.' And the angel says, 'no Joseph, God's his Father'. Verse 20: "That which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." This baby is going to be the One in whom, as Paul puts it, 'the whole fullness of God dwells bodily' (Col 2:9).

And so God steps down into our world to experience the world that we know. And Jesus knows the joys and the lightness and the laughter. He knows the feasting and the friends. But he also knows the trials and temptations.

But having a God who sympathises doesn't get us out of the dock, does it? It doesn't resolve the tension of how he can be saviour *and* judge. The One who condemns the guilty and yet pardons the guilty. Between the contradiction in the very character of God, as he reveals himself to Moses, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty" (Ex 34:6-7).

So how does Jesus reconcile being saviour from sin and judge of sin? By becoming sin for us. And at the cross, Jesus took all our sin upon himself, and in the words of the Creed, 'he was conceived of the virgin Mary, and crucified under Pontius Pilate.' And at the cross, he was cast into the darkness, and he experienced the emptiness as he was alienated from God. And the judge put himself in the dock as our substitute, and he was found guilty, not for his sin, but for ours, so that we might be forgiven and filled, as we put our trust in him to save us and not in all these other things.

And as we do, he doesn't just become our saviour but our defender. As John says, 'If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.' (1 John 2:1).

And it's knowing 'Christ was born to rescue me, to defend me, to deliver me, and he does it by dying for me' that tells you the measure of his steadfast, never-giving up and abounding love for you. And that's what will give you hope and courage to face whatever you're facing.

You see, choosing to obey God and stay with Mary is going to cost Joseph, isn't it? People will think either *he's* slept with Mary, or someone else has, and both will carry huge social stigma. It's why the angel says, "Do not fear" Joseph (v20). Because it's knowing what God is up to this first Christmas that gives him the courage he needs. And it'll do the same for you.

If you're not yet a Christian, to take that first step of faith, to say, 'I'm going to trust Christ, I'm going to side with him', requires courage. And knowing he came for you and died for you and rose again for you*,* will give you that courage.

And it'll do the same for those of us who are Christians. Because if like Joseph you're facing a dark period, and you're wondering how you're ever going to get through it, know Christ was born for you, to save you, and let that light shine hope in the darkness.

Or maybe, to side with Jesus like Joseph sided with Mary, and admit that you believe in a Jesus who came to save and will come to judge, will cost you among your friends or colleagues, and you're hesitating about paying that cost. Well, see him coming into this world to side with you and that'll give you the courage, and security, to side with him.

But one last thing: we live in polarised times. And to love our neighbour as Jesus calls us to requires hope and courage. Well, in v19 Matthew says that Joseph 'being a just man… [was] unwilling to put her to shame.' So Joseph is righteous, but he's also kind. He's godly, but he's also good. And we need that combination of righteousness and kindness more than ever. And seeing Christ come, this first Christmas, to treat us better than we could ever deserve to be treated, will give you the grace to treat others with grace. The grace that, like Joseph, loves and stays. That's righteous and kind.