

### **Matthew 2:13-23**

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

The most striking aspect of this passage is the level of trust which Joseph places in the messages he receives from God. Joseph appears to be unhesitating in heeding the warnings given and following the advice to return. A specific reference is made to angels as messengers in two of the three dreams. How extraordinary that Mary and Joseph should, individually, experience God speaking to them through angels. Does Joseph's knowledge of Mary's earlier experience – and what followed – account for his willingness to take the angels seriously?

How well do we pay attention when God talks to us? How ready are we to recognise the messenger-angels in our lives? How willing are we to take seriously the messages we hear? Most fundamentally, how open are we to trusting our most significant decisions to God?

*(Commentary from Church of Scotland Starters for Sunday)*

### **COCU6A Readings**

We are still in the season of Christmas, when the magnitude of God's love and solidarity with humankind is revealed by God's incarnation. This is teased out by the key themes emerging in this week's texts and the overarching idea of accompaniment. The notion of God at the heart of everything, and the key which unlocks life, is evident in all four texts.

The importance of acknowledgement is a feature of each passage, whether that be acknowledgement of God by us, to ourselves, to others or to God; or whether that be acknowledgement of us by God, through God's direct interaction with us as individuals and as a people, or through Christ's sacrifice.

The character of God is revealed in its different aspects in each passage. Our knowledge of God deepens as we start to grapple with each one. The depth of God's love is exposed by the willingness to accompany us in suffering, as underlined in the passages from Isaiah and from Hebrews. We are exposed to a broader understanding of God's people: a family in which all are equal before God, our parent; a family in which everyone, no matter how different, is welcome; a family in which relationships matter.

### **Psalm 148**

Praise God! Praise God from the heavens; praise God in the heights!

**Praise God, all God's angels; praise God, all God's host!**

Praise God, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise God, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

**Let them praise God's name,**

**for on God's command they were created.**

God established them forever and ever;

**God fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.**

Praise God from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,  
fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling God's command!

**Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!**

**Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!**

Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

Young men and women alike, old and young together!

**Let them praise the God's name, for God's name alone is exalted;**

**God's glory is above earth and heaven.**

God has raised up a horn for the people, praise for all the faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to God.

**Praise God!**

This song of praise from Psalm 148 bursts with joy, revelling in the marvel that is God and demanding that the whole of creation join in. Once again, God is at the heart of everything and, once again, there is an injunction to us all to acknowledge that. This is a God without limitation, whose work cannot but amaze us. The references to diverse aspects of creation teach us that God is inclusive, that there is room for a multiplicity of beings within God's family and that all are welcome. *(Commentary from Church of Scotland)*

### **Isaiah 63:7-9**

I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely"; and he became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

This passage speaks to deep love – and to the repercussions of rejection. The deep love recalled is that shown by God to God's people; now reflected in the writer's love for God. The writer is not only counting their blessings but re-counting them. It is not enough that they are expressed to God: the writer's intention is to ensure that God's generosity is acknowledged and understood by others too. They are attributing glory and telling the story. It is a useful reminder to share our love for God with those around us and that this, in itself, does God honour.

In stark contrast to the furious character described in earlier verses, this passage highlights God's tenderness: mercy, generosity and steadfastness in love are all there – but, by way of explanation, so too is expectation. The assumption is that God's people "will not deal falsely" or betray God. God expects integrity and loyalty from those who are part of this family. Their withdrawal has repercussions. In the same way, we can expect that when we no longer return the respect or love which God – or others – show to us, our covenant with them will also be ruptured.

Verse 9 highlights that God is the very source of succour. God alone is the saviour, redeemer and rescuer. Rather than sending a messenger or angel, God is present for the people in their distress. By inference, we can trust in God completely – and should place our trust in God alone.

*(Commentary from Church of Scotland Starters for Sunday)*

### **Hebrews 2:10-18**

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Here am I and the children whom God has given me."

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Once the hoopla of Christmas fades, and the wonder of the new baby in the manger starts to become a memory, Christians rightly turn to the harder questions that arise from the Incarnation, such as "why did God have to come to us in this way?" and "was it necessary for Christ to suffer during his life and especially in his death?" We ask these questions today, but even at the time of the letter to the Hebrews, people were already asking these questions and attempting to answer them.

Why would God, who created everything that is, and who could come into the world at any time and in any form, choose to become a human being? And why would God choose to commit to living this human life in the exact same way as the rest of us, to be born of a woman as a helpless child? This is the question that the author of Hebrews raises, and answers by saying that "the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father." In other words, when God decided to save humans, it seemed fitting to do so as a human. And having found himself in human form, it follows that Jesus would also experience all that humans do, including suffering. By virtue of his humanity, Jesus is also able to claim all people as his brothers and sisters (confirmed by the reference to Psalm 22:22). *(Micah Johnson, Working Preacher)*