

“WHAT CHILD IS THIS?”

WEEK 1: THE MESSIAH

It has been said that if you ask a stupid question that you should expect a stupid answer. But in Bible study there is no such a thing as a stupid question. For Christians today, this is a prime example. But think for a moment about the time of this Child’s birth. Can you imagine the gossip in a small place like Bethlehem when the shepherds claimed they saw and heard angels proclaiming the birth of a Child who would save the world. No doubt someone would have wondered what they had been on the night before! And as the story gains ground and people believe the shepherds, can you blame them for asking “What Child is this?” And, of course, speculation would have increased substantially when people heard of wise men travelling over a vast distance to bring very expensive gifts to the Child. The sceptics would have pointed out that people from that place were hung up on astrology anyway, but, would they risked life and limb and endured the discomfort of travel if it had been just any old familiar star? What Child merited this kind of attention, especially as their gifts indicated that He would occupy at least two of the offices which required a special anointing in Jewish society – gold for a king and frankincense for a priest. Later, the words of Simeon and Anna in the Jerusalem temple, would have set tongues wagging and no one in Bethlehem would have been left in any doubt that this Child was important, when Herod ordered the slaughter of children under 2 in the town.

But today, I think if anybody in this room were to ask “What Child is this?” most of us would think it was an odd thing to ask, because we already know “Who” He is. But it is “What” this Child is that makes Him “Who” He is. The writing prophets did not know who was being revealed to them, but there can be no doubt that they were given accurate descriptions of what He would be. For you see, the New Testament writers are in no doubt that “This Child” is the Child of prophecy. I sometimes wish our Bible wasn’t divided into the Old and New Testaments, for the Bible contains one continuous story. Christmas is the continuation of the Days of the Lord, this time ushering in the Fourth Day of the Lord, when God took the next step in the process of restoring to His people and the world, the means of achieving an everlasting relationship with Him. So our question takes on extra meaning when we put it in the context of the foretelling of the writing prophets.

The first indication of this is when we start to talk about the prophesied Messiah, because this is where things get a bit complicated. Listen to the words of all the most familiar Christmas carols and ask yourself how many of them mention the word Messiah? The only one I came across in Mission Praise was

*Angel’s from the realms of glory, wing your flight through all the earth;
heralds of creation’s story now proclaim Messiah’s birth.*

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Saviour, Redeemer, king, Son of David, Son of God are all mentioned in one way or another in carols and, I think, generally speaking, most of us would link any one or any combination of these as defining what the word ‘Messiah’ means. But neither the Old Testament prophets or other writers defined the title in these ways. In fact, the actual word only occurs twice in the Old Testament in Daniel 9:25 and 26. It also only occurs twice in the New Testament in John 1:41 and 4:25.

The references in Daniel are translated in the New International Version as ‘the Anointed One.’ The King James version is

25 Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the MESSIAH THE PRINCE shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. 26 And after threescore and two weeks shall MESSIAH be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined.

And I think we can see from this passage why the only consensus among scholars is that the context in which the word occurs is extremely difficult to interpret. It is only with the benefit of hindsight and through the teaching of the New Testament that we could take it as a prophecy about Jesus. However, more definitely we can say that Daniel takes us to the real meaning of the title ‘Messiah’, because it comes from the Hebrew term (David can correct me if I’m wrong here) masiah which mean ‘anointed’. The Greeks translated this as Christos, from which we get Christ.

It is true in the Old Testament that many things were anointed with oil including shields, houses and people’s bodies. But when anointing of people took place there were four major implications. Firstly, the person was deemed to have been set apart for a divine purpose. For example, in Isaiah 45:1 we are told:

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him—and the gates shall not be closed:

And in verse 13 we are told the purpose of this anointing.

I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness, and I will make all his paths straight; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the LORD of hosts.

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Secondly, God’s empowerment by the Spirit to carry out the divine task accompanied the anointing. In the case of Cyrus only empowerment of the Spirit could have motivated him to release the exiles from a righteous motive without any thought of reward. Thirdly, God’s anointed were accorded a special protection. 1 Samuel 24:10 tells us that David did not kill Saul when he had the chance to do so, saying, **“I will not lift my hand against my master, because he is the Lord’s anointed.”** This did not prevent physical harm coming to people God had anointed to serve Him, but it does mean that a harsher judgement will come to those who cause that harm. Lastly, it refers to the Jewish ‘Messiah’ who would be a descendant of David, and as a king would receive anointing by God.

Just from the first point alone, that of being ‘set apart’ for divine use or purpose, we begin to see that the title of Messiah is not something that can be earned by human endeavour or merit. So it seems that the question that we should be asking today is; “Does restricting the meaning of Messiah to ‘anointed one’ take away from the identity and role of ‘This Child’? Hopefully, over these weeks, as we look at what anointed meant in Old Testament terms we will start to see that all that we believe about the prophesied Messiah stems from the fact that if ‘This Child’ had not been ‘anointed’, then His future role and identity could never have led to all that we believe as Christians, about Him today. Every other title or office that we attribute to Jesus comes under the umbrella of the title Messiah – The Anointed One.

Just a few of examples from what the prophets have told us leads to this conclusion. If we start with the references in Daniel, whatever “Anointed One” he had in mind, we can glean from the context that the person would be so prominent he would be recognised as someone anointed by God. In addition, the timescale mentioned in the verses imply that this person would have such an impact that he would characterise an age or determine and define a specific period in the history of the world. This Person would stand out to such an extent that people living in that period of time would recognise who was being spoken about when the title ‘Messiah’ was used. According to the NIV, Daniel then goes on to say that this Person would be a ruler. In the RSV the term used is ‘prince.’ The KJV uses the words “the Messiah the Prince,” which clearly means an anointed royal ruler.

Once the actual meaning of ‘Messiah’ is established from these two mentions in Daniel, are we justified in applying Daniel’s reference to a royal Messiah to “This Child”? In terms of being anointed Isaiah 61:1-2 is an important reference

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the

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broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’S favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;

We know from Isaiah’s call that he had been set apart for a divine purpose and this purpose is spelled out in these verses. But when Isaiah says that the spirit of the Lord is upon him, he means it in the Old Testament sense of being empowered to carry out his task. Also, Isaiah includes the day of the Lord’s favour as well as His day of vengeance which was the Babylonian captivity.

Jesus was later to apply this passage to Himself in Luke 4:18-19

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

A fulfilment of the angels’ message at His birth. **”Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom His favour rests.”**

Two points have to be made about these texts. One is that Jesus did not have to include the day of vengeance, because that was already past from the Old Testament Isaiah’s perspective. The second point is more significant because when Jesus used these words of Himself, He was aware that He did not just have the limited spiritual power of the Old Testament but had been born of the Spirit and was permanently endowed with the Spirit of the Living God. His was the divine Spirit in the complete sense of the word. Isaiah 11:2-5 gives us the sense of what this would mean in the life of “This Child”.

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord – and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

Some of this passage we may come back to because it gives a summary of the kind of character “This Child” will have. Wisdom, understanding and the ability to advise and be a just judge. He would be knowledgeable and display reverence and faithful obedience to God. Also, very significantly, righteousness and justice, which we saw September were the two manifestations of God’s purity, will be the hallmarks of His activity. It is this passage too that gives us

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the connection between anointing and royalty for the first verse of chapter 11 says that this Person will be the “shoot that will come up from the stump of Jesse”, who was, of course, the father of David.

And, if we want further justification, to believe “This Child” is the anointed one, we need look no further than the prophecies which point to the circumstances of His birth. There are many references to the Messiah’s birth in the Old Testament, but among the writing prophets it is Isaiah who has the most to say about it. One of the most familiar texts is Isaiah 7:14

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

True God of true God, light of light eternal, He who abhors not the virgin’s womb. Son of the Father, begotten not created: O come let us adore Him.....

We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel.

Just for this one reference alone have come words that we will sing this Christmas, and in doing so we are confirming that this is true prophecy because it has come to pass. It confirms too, Daniel’s prophecy that the Messiah will be unique and will be easily identifiable by what is said about Him. For the last 2000 years and all over this world today, when a virgin birth is mentioned or people see an image of the Madonna and child, for Christians and non-Christians alike, the first Person who usually comes to mind is Jesus Christ.

Not only was the virgin birth foretold, so too was the place of His birth in **Micah 5:2.**

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from OLD from ANCIENT times.

Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie....yet in your dark streets shining is everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in you tonight.

Once in royal David’s city.....

Even here we can see the truth of prophesy down to the finest detail. Ancient and old times take us back to Genesis and Ruth. The thread of connections which run from these books to the first chapter of Matthew could never have been engineered by any human being. Ephrath was the original name of Bethlehem. Rachel was buried there and Benjamin was born there. (Gen.

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35:16-18; 48:7) The valley to the east was the scene of the story of Ruth. Boaz was told: **Ruth 4:11**

.....May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem.

And we know from David’s sermons on Ruth that she and Boaz were the great-grandparents of David who would be born in Bethlehem. Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus traces “This Child’s” ancestry back to the old and ancient times making these connections, and, in doing so, depicts Jesus as the prophesied descendant of David, born in the town where David himself was anointed as king by Samuel.

With the benefit of hindsight and through the work of Bible scholars who have made the connections between quite separate kinds of writings we find that God has indeed revealed to the prophets, all the things He wants us to know about the stages of salvation-history. There is no point, especially to the messianic prophecies, if they do not point us in the direction of the actual coming of a Messiah to earth. These prophetic references to a unique individual, set apart for a divine purpose, who would become universally recognisable by the manner of His birth and the accurate foretelling of His birthplace just give the first indications what impact “This Child” is going to have in God’s plans for this world?

If our carols are anything to go by, we identify Jesus’ role in those salvation plans as Saviour and Redeemer. Silent night tells us “*Christ the Redeemer is here*” and “*Saviour, since You are born.*”

Shepherds were told

*To you in David’s town this day is born of David’s line
A Saviour who is Christ the Lord, and this shall be the sign*

A lesser known song in Mission Praise 71 tells of

*Once the most holy child of salvation gentle and lowly lived below:
Now as our glorious mighty Redeemer, see Him victorious over each foe.*

However, again it is only with the knowledge of crucifixion and resurrection that we can hail Jesus as Saviour and Redeemer. These are not the terms the prophets used, but all that was said about the Anointed One points us in those directions and justifies our use of the terms. Perhaps the song that comes nearest to the prophetic perspective is:

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From heaven You came, helpless babe, entered our world, Your glory veiled, not to be served but to serve, and give Your life that we might live.

Much scholarly discussion has taken place over the identity of the Servant in Isaiah. Some are of the opinion that the prophet meant Israel which appears to be the case from **Isaiah 49:3**

He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendour.”

It is true that this is what the nation of Israel was intended to do, but as we saw it failed miserably both before and after the exile. In verse 6 we have a bit of a contradiction. In verse 6, God is saying,

“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.

This appears to be saying that the servant will have a ministry both to Israel and the Gentiles and would be the means of world-wide salvation. Again in one sense this could apply to the nation of Israel for the Messiah did come from that nation. But, it is when we move to other prophetic references to the Messiah and especially to Isaiah 53, which is one of the most well-known passages in the whole of the Bible, that we begin to realise that a person is being described. While the nation of Israel has been **“Despised and rejected by men”**, it could never credibly be described as a **“a man of sorrows”** who would be,

5-6,9 He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

When we sing *“see the Lamb of God appears, promised from eternal years”* we are but echoing Isaiah’s word in verse 7 that the Servant was **“led like a lamb to the slaughter”** for verse 8 says that it was **“for the transgression of my people he was stricken.”**

It is very difficult to see how a nation collectively would have been able to fulfil this prophecy of a universal Saviour bearing the punishment for all the sins of the world. The plain meaning of these verses is that the Servant is no less than *“a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord”*, where Christ means, Messiah, the Anointed One of God. It’s not usually a Christmas text, but the testimony of John 1:41-42 is that Isaiah’s description of Suffering Servant points to the

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Messiah, who he unambiguously identifies as Jesus. And what better answer to the question “What Child is this?” could there be than Andrew’s response?

“We have found the Messiah (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.

WEEK 2: THE PROPHET.

It is said that a picture can paint a thousand words, but could you imagine me standing up here and putting the power-point pictures up on the screen, with no words on them and me not saying anything about them? Have you ever imagined what life would be like if there was no such things as words? Now admittedly, we may wish at times that words didn’t exist because words can do so much damage. But they can also bring wonderful things into our lives as well. And the most wonderful words of all are those contained in the Word of God. Without those we would not be sitting here now. Without them we would not be celebrating this time of the year because we would know nothing of the coming of ‘This Child’ whose birth we are remembering. So “What Child is This?” that we should be celebrating His birth over two thousand years later. That He is the Messiah, the divinely Anointed One is reason enough, but what would this Messiah be and what would He do?

I don’t want to take up too much extra time but last week the issue was raised of why other anointed people in the Old Testament were not regarded as messiahs. Technically, they could be called that on the basis of the meaning of the word. But as Maggie said, there is a difference between ‘a’ messiah and “THE” Messiah. The Jews were waiting for, and are still expecting a Davidic ruler who will militarily restore Israel to leadership in world affairs. But, it is only as we look at the three key offices of state in ancient Jewish society that we begin to see that only one unique individual could truly be said to be THE Messiah. And we start with the Prophet, for prophecy was the first God-appointed means of communication with His people.

We saw from our study of the writing prophets that their prophecies came at critical points in salvation history and that they fore-told a future Day of the Lord when the Messiah would come and, that time would mark the fourth ‘Day of the Lord.’ The birth of “This Child” heralds the arrival of that Day and it is another critical juncture in God’s on-going plans for this world. We believe this because the writers of the New Testament, basing their theology on the prophecies of the Old Testament, came to the conclusion that “This Child” would be the means of restoring the kind of community that God had intended Israel to be. It was a community intended to be in communication with God through the words of its prophets; a community worshipping and serving God through priestly mediation, ritual and teaching; and a nation practising justice and righteousness under the anointed kings.

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We know that by the time of Malachi around 415BC, that the prophets had not been heeded and prophecy ceased for 400 years. The priests were degenerate and became the puppets of whatever empire had jurisdiction over Judea. And the possibility of the Jews having an ethnic king was a hope consigned to apocalyptic literature. But just as God sent prophets to His people throughout the Old Testament period, so “This Child” was first recognised by contemporary society as a prophet during His 3-year public ministry.

Matthew 21:10-11 and 46 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Luke 7:16-17 records the reaction when Jesus’ raised the widow’s son from the dead **Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favourably on his people!”** This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

In Luke 24:19 we find the reply of the Emmaus Road disciples to Jesus, after the crucifixion. **He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,**

John 6:14 After the feeding of the 5000 **When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”**

This was recognised even by the woman at the well in Samaria, in spite of the hostility which existed between the Samaritans and Jews. Jesus’ own words on that occasion acknowledged that He was both the Messiah and a prophet.

John 4:19 The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.
25The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” **26**Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

43When the two days were over, he went from that place to Galilee **44**(for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in the prophet’s own country).

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But popular acclaim can be fickle, and while we can believe the words Jesus spoke about Himself by faith, we have plenty of Biblical evidence to justify that belief. Isaiah is the most quoted prophet in the New Testament regarding the life of Jesus. But Isaiah not only spoke of Jesus, he spoke too of the appearance of a prophet who would herald His coming.

Isaiah 40:3

A voice of one calling in the desert prepare the way for the Lord make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.

Malachi 3:1 and 4:5 adds some more details.

See, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me.....See I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.....

It has been said that only history can determine the truth of prophecy and when, centuries later, Luke records the ministry of John in chapter 4, he quotes Isaiah, indicating his acceptance that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist.

Luke 1:17 and 76

And he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.....

And you my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way for Him.

We know that John was the forerunner of Jesus but is there any further evidence that 'This Child' was the One God was referring to when He told Moses:

Deuteronomy 18:18-19

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.

Our belief that Jesus was the Prophet foretold in this ancient prophecy comes from the words of Peter and Stephen, this time millennia later. On the day of Pentecost Peter told the crowd Acts 3:22-23

For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you.

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Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.

And a short time later, Stephen’s defence before the Sanhedrin included the words: **Acts 7:37**

This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up.’

He was stoned for including this in the list of things pointing to Jesus, whom Stephen bluntly said they had murdered. The testimonies of Peter and Stephen were uncompromising and unequivocal. None of their hearers were left in any doubt that Jesus was the prophesied Prophet promised to Moses. But it was John who brings us back to the heart of prophecy for the stock-in-trade of the prophets was their words. For John, “This Child” brought a new dimension to both the Prophet and the words He would speak.

John 1:1 and 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

What child is this, who laid to rest, on Mary’s lap is sleeping....

Why lies He in such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding?

Good Christians fear; for sinners here the silent WORD is pleading.

WORD of the Father now in flesh appearing. O come let us adore Him.

Whereas the Word of God had come to the prophets of old, the Word of the Lord did not just come to Jesus, He was the Word incarnate. ‘In the beginning’ is the connection John makes with Genesis 1:1 to emphasise that “This Child” did not have to receive words from God as the prophets did, but He, Himself was the Author of the words He would speak. Jesus affirms this in **John 14:9-10**

.....Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

The Old Testament prophecies and the testimonies of people who were eye-witnesses to Jesus’ ministry all come to the same conclusion, viz., that “This Child” was a prophet, but in the sense that no prophet before Him had ever possessed His abilities or His authority. **Matthew 28:18-20** gives us the reason.

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And Jesus came and said to them, “ALL AUTHORITY IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and TEACHING THEM TO OBEY EVERYTHING THAT I HAVE COMMANDED you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Divine authority rested in the Person of Jesus and it was an authority which was to extend until the end of the age, confirmed by the writer to the Hebrews.

Hebrews 1:1-3

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, BUT IN THESE LAST DAYS HE HAS SPOKEN BY HIS SON, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, SUSTAINING ALL THINGS BY HIS POWERFUL WORD.

You may wonder why we keep coming back to this text. The answer is simple. This verse is New Testament theology in a nutshell – a sound bite I think you call it these days. It is the foundation upon which all our beliefs about Jesus rest. It is the statement that categorically endorses and reinforces Jesus’ command to His disciples to teach people to obey His words. This supercedes every other revelation given to any previous prophet. That is not to say that previous prophetic words were to be disregarded as irrelevant. In fact, when we classify the words of Jesus we find that they follow exactly the same pattern of the true prophets. We summarised the word of God spoken by the Old Testament prophets as rebellion, repentance, retribution and restoration, and according to John, Jesus words embodied all that was involved in these situations.

2 Peter 1:20-21 reminds us too that **“...no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”** And if we take the situations addressed by the ancient prophets, we will see that, as a prophet, ‘This Child’ has indeed given us the definitive word of God for our times. For example, can we say that what Jeremiah said about his generation did not apply to Jesus’ time and applies exactly the same today.

Jeremiah 17:9-10

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The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

. **Matthew 17:17/Luke 9:41** records Jesus saying,

“You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?

Perverse means a deliberate and obstinate desire to behave unacceptable to God, and when it is coupled with unfaithfulness, it adds up to what constituted the rebellion against God described by the Old Testament prophets. And just as Israel’s prophets had called for repentance time and time again, this too becomes the main theme of Jesus’ words. Matthew 11:20-24 sums up both the theme of repentance and the consequences of a failure to repent.

Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.

It is both forth-told and fore-told that Capernaum’s and Bethsaida’s failure to repent would incur a harsher judgement than that of the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon. The wickedness of Sodom was proverbial even in Jesus’s day, as was its destruction. You can imagine the impact of His words when Jesus added, **“But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.”**

Jesus’ words did not change these cities. Neither did the signs He performed. John records seven signs or miracles accomplished just by Jesus’ spoken word. But in spite of what people had seen and heard John relates their disbelief to the words of Isaiah 53:1 and 6:1-4

John 12:37-41

Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. *This was to fulfil the word of Isaiah the prophet:*

“Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?.....He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them.” Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, He made it clear that like the prophets before Him, including John the Baptist, God’s clarion call was to repent. He also made it clear that failure to do so incur God’s judgement, but this time that judgement would be final. Again it is Isaiah who highlights that retribution will follow a stubborn refusal to heed the prophetic word.

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Isaiah 49:2 2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away.

Hebrews 4:12-13 Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Isaiah 11:4b he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Revelation 2:16 Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth.

Final retribution will come. God has already given 2000 years for repentance. Yet, it is Jesus' words which define the way to experience restoration rather than retribution on that Fifth and final Day of the Lord. He would be the Way, the Truth and the Life for, the foundation of restoration is believing the words Jesus forth-told about God, about Himself, about the past, present and future state of the world, the need for repentance and the path of discipleship. It is believing the words He fore-told about the day when God's restoration plans would be completed, when He, Himself, would return in glory to claim His people and usher in the creation of a new heaven and a new earth.

Every Christmas the birth of "This Child" reminds us that we have been given the choice of whether or not to listen and to believe the words He spoke while on earth. He is worth listening to for of whom else did the prophets ever write:

Isaiah 50:5

The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary.

In this context, the weary means those who are sick and tired of the way life is going and the way it is lived out in society. Isaiah points us to the One who can deal with this problem.

Isaiah 42:1-1

1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not

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quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth;

The antidote is Jesus’ own words in Matthew 11:28-29.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

And Peter sums that up for us in his wonderful confession of faith in **John 6:68-69** **“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”**

Much more could be said about Jesus being the prophesied prophet but perhaps at Christmas time it is sufficient to believe that “This Child” is “Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.” And Christmas time reminds us that heeding what He has forth-told and fore-told will lead to what will be the ultimate perfect and permanent ‘rest for our souls.’ We find it first in the words of **Jeremiah 28:9**

As for the PROPHET WHO PROPHESES PEACE, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet.”

Jesus says in John 14:27

27Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

It was a divine gift to be bestowed on those who would believe the prophetic words of “This Child” whose birth was accompanied by an angelic host hailing Him as the bringer of peace - the peace with God that speaks of the complete restoration of humanity’s relationship with Him.

Luke 2:12-14

This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

We sing it as

*All glory be to God on high and to the earth be peace;
Goodwill henceforth from heaven to men begin and never cease.*

Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.

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WEEK 3: THE PRIEST

Last Sunday there was a collection for the Bible Society whose aim is to give access to Bibles to all. In a couple of weeks time it will be Bible Sunday when we will again be reminded that this Book is the very bedrock of our faith. On this coming Saturday, Channel 5 will be screening a ten part series on the Bible, telling it's story from Genesis to Revelation. I hope it lives up to what it is claiming to be because it will show that there is one continuous story running through the whole Bible from start to finish. But as Russ said last week, sometimes the Bible seems like a jigsaw puzzle because the parts of the story don't come one chapter after the next, or even in chronological order. Sometimes they appear to be so scattered throughout the Bible that it's hard to follow the story being told. And for any of you who do do jigsaws, you will have come across the part that doesn't seem to fit in anywhere, and it's only when the puzzle is almost finished that you find that it fits perfectly into one particular spot and makes the picture complete. In many ways these talks are like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. They concentrate on one part of it and try to find all the pieces to complete that particular part. Sometimes, the pieces are so obvious that you know immediately where they should go – just like the Christmas story or the crucifixion. Other times, even within those familiar pictures, certain pieces are a bit harder to find – and that is the case when we come to talking about “This Child” as the prophesied Priest.

The parts for this picture are hard to find because neither Jesus nor his disciples ever claimed He was a priest during His lifetime, and there are few references to it outside of Hebrews. In spite of those caveats, there are very sound reasons for justifying the claim that “This Child” was sent by God to fulfil that role in relation to the new community that would come into being because of Him.

In the first place, we have to distinguish Jesus from the priestly line that was established at Sinai. With only the exception of the period of the Babylonian exile, the Aaronic, Levitical priesthood continued from the time of Moses, through Zadok, associated with David and Solomon and the Jerusalem temple, right down to the coming of the Greeks. Then the Macabbeans took over the priesthood and when the Romans came, the High Priest was a political appointee. Just as prophecy had ceased, so the priestly function designed by God had also come to an end. When Jesus was born, the words of Hosea 4:6 and Jeremiah 23:11 were as relevant in New Testament times as they were when they were first spoken.

Hosea 4:6 & Jeremiah 23:11

Both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their wickedness, says the LORD.

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So, you can see the problem if we to claim that “This Child” was a part of the priestly picture that had become so corrupted over millennia. Thankfully, we don’t have to deal with that problem. When we look at the details of Jesus’ lineage we find that He comes from the line of Judah (Matthew 1:3), not Levi. This is probably the main reason why He was not recognised as a priest in His lifetime. But that brings us to a different problem. How, then, do we establish His credentials as a priest? And that’s when we find how scattered the pieces to answer that question are. In fact, we have to go right back to Genesis to find the first part. We assume that the Israelites had no priests before the Sinai covenant. That assumption is wrong because back in the days of Abraham, God had already appointed a priest.

Genesis 14:18-20

And KING Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was PRIEST OF GOD MOST HIGH. He blessed him and said, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”

It seems significant that Melchizedek is mentioned in Genesis and especially to the one who would become the father of the faithful believers through the ages. Melchizedek appears and then disappears. We are given no information about where he came from, who his ancestors were or where he went after this meeting with Abraham. He appears at a time when tribal peoples rather than nations existed, therefore he is not connected with any specific people or nationality. At a time when people’s status and standing were dependent on being able to trace their ancestry and their family or tribal connections, this lack of information makes Melchizedek a very mysterious figure. Yet his presence and authority was such that Abraham, a powerful and wealthy man in his own right, accepted his blessing from “God Most High” and subsequently paid tithes to him – the portion that would later be decreed for the Aaronic priesthood. Numbers 18:21

21To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for a possession in return for the service that they perform, the service in the tent of meeting.

And it’s not until we come to the reign of David, millennia later, that we find the second part. We find it in Psalm 110:4

The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Scholars agree that this psalm depicts God addressing His Son - “the Lord says to my Lord...” Two significant pieces of information are added about Melchizedek. According to the psalmist, this High Priest exists because of God’s oath that He would never change His mind about Him. Secondly, this

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Priest would live forever, unlike those of the Aaronic line who died out, or were prevented from carrying out their roles because of circumstances.

Another lengthy disappearance until a third part appears in its most explicit form as referring to “This Child” in Hebrews 5:5-6 and 9-10

5 So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”..... and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Now we could question whether or not just three parts of Scripture justify our claim that Jesus was the Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Fortunately, there are a few more parts that fit precisely around this picture. We are told in Genesis that Melchizedek was a King as well as a priest. That he was king of Salem is significant for the word Salem is derived from an ancient word form meaning ‘peace’. Isaiah 9:6 climaxes the qualities of the child that is to be born as “Prince of Peace.”

6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Again we have to do another bit of searching for the part that fits into this prophecy, but we do find a very important part referring to priestly royalty in the prophecy of Zechariah. It’s the time after the exile when Joshua, whose name is another form of Jesus, was the High Priest. Zechariah’s prophecy links the two offices of Priest-King in one person.

3:8-9 Now listen, Joshua, high priest, you and your colleagues who sit before you! **FOR THEY ARE AN OMEN OF THINGS TO COME: I AM GOING TO BRING MY SERVANT THE BRANCH.** 9 For on the stone that I have set before Joshua ...I will engrave its inscription, says the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day.

Zechariah 6:11-13

11 TAKE THE SILVER AND GOLD AND MAKE A CROWN AND SET IT ON THE HEAD OF THE HIGH PRIEST JOSHUA SAY TO HIM: THUS SAYS THE LORD OF HOSTS: HERE IS A MAN WHOSE NAME IS BRANCH: FOR HE SHALL BRANCH OUT IN HIS PLACE, AND HE SHALL BUILD THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD. 13 IT IS HE THAT SHALL BUILD THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD; HE SHALL BEAR

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ROYAL HONOUR, AND SHALL SIT UPON HIS THRONE AND RULE. THERE SHALL BE A PRIEST BY HIS THRONE, WITH PEACEFUL UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN THE TWO OF THEM. (I.E. BETWEEN PRIEST AND KING).

Priestly leadership was given to Joshua in the temple rebuilt under the governor Zerubbabel, but Joshua was also a sign given by God to designate the future High Priest who would also be a King. The part that fits in here is the reference to the Branch, in Isaiah 11:1 and Jeremiah 33:15

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

In other words, parts of Old Testament Scripture from the time of Abraham to the end of prophecy points towards the coming of a Priest-King of the order of Melchizedek. Today the only Person that we know who could qualify in both accounts is “This Child”. In fact, we reaffirm it every time we sing

*Born a king on Bethlehem’s plain. God I bring to crown Him again:
King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign.*

*Frankincense for Jesus have I, God on earth yet Priest on high;
Prayer and praising all men raising: worship is earth’s reply.*

Today it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we can fit these pieces together to claim “This Child” as the messianic Priest. But there are other pieces to support the claim for we find parts of Scripture that show that “This Child” was the embodiment of all that priests were supposed to be. Usually we think of Old Testament priests as being mainly concerned with the temple ritual and sacrificial ceremonies, but the role of the priest involved much more than that.

Leviticus 10:11 God charged Aaron and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them through Moses.

As the Israelites grew into a nation scattered throughout the Promised Land, it was the task of the priests to pass on this teaching for they had been given the custody and administration of the Mosaic Law.

In Ezekiel’s vision of the restored temple, the priests were to Ezekiel 44:

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23.....teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean.

Malachi explicitly states the role of the priest in teaching. 2:7

For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction – because he is the messenger of the Lord almighty....

As we read the Gospels we find that Jesus, Himself said that He had not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. Jesus, in effect, taught the law by practising what He preached.

Of the Messiah, Isaiah foretold.50:4

4 The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Even today non-Christians recognise the powerful ethical and moral teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and the simple, yet profound teaching in the parables. What they are not prepared to accept is the teaching about the coming Kingdom of God and what it will mean in terms of the Good News of the Gospel. But for people’s own times, the teaching of Jesus was like rain coming after a long drought. These are just a few examples. Many will be familiar to you, but read through the Gospels and you will find that Pharisees, Sadducees, a blind man, a rich young ruler, scribes (lawyers), disciples, Mary at the tomb, the people in general and even “a teacher of Israel” all referred to Jesus as “Teacher.” The things they asked Him about ranged from the signs of the end of the age to greatest commandment to the way of eternal life; and from asking for sight, to family inheritance claims. What they all agreed about was that His teaching on any of these matters was authoritative.

Mark 1:22

22They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

John 7: 15

15The Jews were astonished at it, saying, “How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?”

Matthew 22:34-36

34When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

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Mark 10:51

51Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.”

Luke 12:13

13Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

Luke 18:18

18A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Luke 20:21 Spies sent by scribes and chief priests to trap Him

21So they asked him, “Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth.

Luke 20:39

39Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.” **40**For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

Luke 21:7 Disciples addressed Him as teacher

7They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?”

John 3:2

1Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **2**He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

10Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

And when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, this too is an indirect indication of the priesthood of “This Child”. Jesus’ prayer life was that of a priest mediating between God and His people. Luke 22:31-32 is significant for it came at a point when Jesus knew He would be let down by Peter.

Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

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But it is John 17 that gives us the most penetrating insight into Jesus’ prayers. Scholars have called this the “High Priestly” prayer. Jesus prays for Himself, then for His disciples and finally for all who will believe through their message.

2 For you granted him (the Son) authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: THAT THEY MAY KNOW YOU, THE ONLY TRUE GOD AND JESUS CHRIST WHOM YOU HAVE SENT.

4 I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.

17-19 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. FOR THEM I SANCTIFY MYSELF, THAT THEY TOO MAY BE TRULY SANCTIFIED.

God had given the Aaronic priesthood authority over all Israel. It was their role to bring the people to a knowledge of God. And it was faithful obedience to their God-given calling that brought glory to God and provided the witness to their own people and to the other nations. Also, if we go back to Moses we see emphasis put time and time again on obedience to the words that he spoke to the people. Jesus was the only Person to fulfil all the words of the Law perfectly for the way to sanctity throughout the Old Testament was obedience to the Word of God given through the Law and the prophets. It is still the same today except that as we saw last week, “This Child” is “Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.” (216) “He who is from everlasting now becomes the Incarnate Word”. He is our priest in teaching us God’s Word, but as the personification of the Word, He also sanctifies us through it by becoming the Way, the Truth and the Life – the only mediator between God and man.

That brings us to the most well-known way in which “This Child” is not just a priest but our High Priest. If I’m not mistaken, the most enduring and most prominent image and fact about the priesthood, are those of the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies once a year to represent the people before God on the Day of Atonement. We associate the High Priest with the scapegoat who bears the sins of the people and is sent out into the desert to die. This association with sacrifice is usually more associated with Easter than with Christmas. And the writer to the Hebrews, more or less, reinforces this association. However, if there had been no cradle there would not have been a cross. Whether we are conscious of it or not, even at Christmas we make reference to the priestly role of Jesus.

Two references from Hebrews 7:27 lead us to this.

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Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.

As just mentioned Jesus did not have to purify Himself for He did that by living in perfect obedience to the law. As, High Priest, He is uniquely qualified to enter into the very presence of God. However, when He does so, He enters in a dual role, for He is both the one who offers the sacrifice and the sacrifice itself. . We affirm that when we sing:

*Child in a manger, infant of Mary, outcast and stranger, Lord of all.
Child who inherits all our transgressions, all our demerits on Him fall*

MP 216

*Born to be our sanctuary, born to give us light and peace;
For our sins to bring forgiveness, from our guilt to bring release.*

The consequence of this is spelt out in Hebrews 7: 25.

“Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”

And that is why so many of our Christmas carols refer to “This Child” as Saviour and Redeemer.

*Good Christian men rejoice with heart and soul and voice
Now ye need not fear the grave: Jesus Christ was born to save
Calls you one, and calls you all, to gain His everlasting hall
Christ was born to save, Christ was born to save.*

*Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.
Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the new born king.*

*See amid the winter’s snow, born for us on earth below,
See the Lamb of God appears, promised from eternal years
Hail thou ever-blessed morn! Hail redemption’s happy dawn!
Sing through all Jerusalem, Christ is born in Bethlehem.*

Silent Night

Christ the Redeemer is here, Christ the Redeemer is here

The First Noel

Then let us all with one accord sing praises to our heavenly Lord;

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*For Christ has our salvation wrought and with His blood mankind has bought
Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell. Born is the King of Israel.*

Glorious now behold Him arise, King and God and sacrifice.....

The references to Melchizedek, Abraham, David, and Zechariah’s account of the role of Joshua, the High Priest to the returning exiles, we have the pieces that point to “This Child” restoring the true priesthood to God’s people. Add to those, the pieces that show the priestly aspects of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Then to finish off the picture, add the insight given by the Holy Spirit to the writer to the Hebrews who pieced together the references to spell out their meaning for the followers of Jesus. Although these pieces are scattered throughout Scripture, nevertheless they give us the justification over two thousand years later, to assert that no other human being could have uniquely fulfilled the prophecies of a Priest who would at the same time be a King. And next week we will look at the way in which “This Child” is born to be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

WEEK 4: THE KING

People say that commercialism has ruined Christmas and that its true meaning has been lost. We could probably all agree with that statement, but it isn’t entirely true. All over the world there is a faithful remnant who will celebrate because ‘This Child’ is the Child of prophecy. His birth was denied to the returning exiles and who had expected the glorious Day of the Lord to arrive once Jerusalem and the temple had been rebuilt. And, although centuries were to pass before that glorious fourth Day of the Lord came, it did come as God had promised it would. The coming of the “Anointed One,” which we celebrate at this season, was a decisive stage in God’s restoration plan and purpose. In the last three weeks we have seen that messiahship, prophecy and priesthood were restored to God’s people.

The final office to be restored was that of king. The Assyrian and Babylonian conquests had brought to an end the kingship of both Israel and Judah. To this day, the remnant of both kingdoms have never been ruled by a king of their own race. It is true that the Jews were given a king – Herod the Great – by the Romans. But he was king only because he had helped the Romans to subdue Judea. As an Idumean, heir of Edomite territory, he continued that nation’s hostility to the people of God by helping the Roman conquerors. Consequently, he was never accepted by the Jews as a true king. While they had no choice but to tolerate this puppet ruler, Jews never stopped longing for the day when the Jewish king, foretold by the prophets, would come and restore the kingdom to God’s chosen people. What was not expected was that the prophesied king,

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who would accomplish this, would be born in a stable! What was even more inconceivable was that “This Child” would fulfil Zechariah’s prophecy by becoming the King not just of one nation restored to a powerful position in the world, but king over all the earth. In other words, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

In order for this to happen though, God had to put in place Someone who could unite the world under His banner. And it would have to be a banner of a kingdom distinct from any earthly form of sovereignty. God had reached the point where true sovereignty had to be established for all time. This was because in Israelite history there had been dual sovereignty. At the beginning of Israelite history, Yahweh was sovereign, but the peoples’ desire for an earthly king was a rejection of that sovereignty. 1 Samuel 8:7

and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.

This created an ambiguity that existed until the fall of the monarchies of Israel and Judah, because it created a conflict of interests between the demands of the sovereignty God as established by the Sinai covenant, and the actions of reigning kings. Even though the concept of the sovereignty of God was never challenged in the Old Testament, the conduct of His people nullified it in national life. But God was not going to relinquish His prerogative of kingship. Scholars agree that the theme of chapters 6 to 12 of Isaiah is that of the coming King in contrast to the existing kings, and throughout the other prophecies there are reminders that God would provide the ultimate King for His people.

David, Israel’s greatest king, recognises the sovereignty of God and the prophets are emphatic about it.

Psalm 8:1 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth. You have set your glory above the heavens.

Isaiah 33:22

22 For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our ruler, the LORD is our king; he will save us.

Isaiah 44:6

6 Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

Jeremiah 10:7

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7 Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For that is your due; among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is no one like you.

Ezekiel 20:33

33As I live, says the Lord GOD, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out, I will be king over you.

Zephaniah 3:15

15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

Zechariah 14:16

16Then all who survive of the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the festival of booths.

The birth of “This Child” was to be the demarcation line between the nature of kingship of the past and the sovereignty of the Kingdom of God which He would inaugurate. Zechariah 14:9 had prophesied:

And the LORD WILL BECOME KING OVER ALL THE EARTH; on that day the LORD WILL BE ONE AND HIS NAME ONE.

That may cause a problem if we regard both Jesus and God as King, but Paul explains that there will be no ambiguity or conflict of interests on that fifth and final Day of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 15:25 & 28

FOR HE MUST REIGN UNTIL HE HAS PUT ALL HIS ENEMIES UNDER HIS FEET. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.... WHEN ALL THINGS ARE SUBJECTED TO HIM, THEN THE SON HIMSELF WILL ALSO BE SUBJECTED TO THE ONE WHO PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIM, SO THAT GOD MAY BE ALL IN ALL.

Until that happens at the end of the age, as Paul says, Jesus must reign until the Kingdom is fully established. Why are we certain that this would be achieved through Jesus? Firstly, there is the evidence of lineage. We’ll sing it out this Christmas time in lines like these in our carols.

- Once in royal David’s city.
- Oh little town of Bethlehem

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- Oh holy Child of Bethlehem
- Born a king on Bethlehem’s plain
- To you in David’s town this day is born of David’s line
- 493 Oh come Thou rod of Jesse. Oh come Thou key of David....
- 216 Hail the Holy One of Israel, chosen heir to David’s throne

They express the affirmation that “This Child’s” claim to kingship is based on God’s covenant with David. 2 Samuel 7:16

Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

This was a cast-iron guarantee given to David through the prophet Nathan. Once God had made this covenant, there was no question of it not being fulfilled. The only questions about it were the when and the how. Those matters were God’s prerogative because ultimately all government is derived from the sovereignty of God. In spite of the failures of the kings of Judah, excepting Hezekiah and Josiah, when we read through Matthew’s genealogy we find that David’s line did continue through the kings of Judah even after the exile. One of Josiah’s sons became the grandfather of Zerubbabel, mentioned in Zechariah as the governor of Judah after the exile, and the one responsible for supporting Joshua the High Priest to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. **Haggai 2:23** gives us an interesting detail about him.

“I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,” declares the Lord God Almighty.

A signet ring in Biblical times was a symbol of kingship and royal authority. While, at the time, it indicated more that Zerubbabel had been chosen as God’s special leader, thus giving the people assurance of His continued presence with them, it could also have fuelled the people’s messianic expectations. And that brings us to the New Testament for Zerubbabel was the ancestor of Joseph, Matthew ending by saying **“Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ.”** Even if we only had this genealogy which can be traced back unbroken for nearly 1000 years, we would have to give some credence to the claim that “This Child’s” was the destined everlasting heir to David’s throne. (David died 971BC)

But why did God choose David with all his serious faults and failings? He stands out because, in God’s eyes, his heart was right. When David’s sins were pointed out to him, his immediate response was confession and repentance. David was a man who in Psalm 51 prays for “a pure heart” and a “steadfast” and “willing” spirit. That his repentance was genuine is in his recognition that

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God would not despise “a broken and contrite heart.” God recognised this quality in David. In 1 Samuel 13:14 Samuel is commanded by God to tell Saul that he and his family have been rejected as kings of Israel. Instead **the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.**”

1 Samuel 15:7

But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

God said to Solomon 1 Kings 9:4

As for you, if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with **integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my ordinances,** then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised your father David, saying, ‘There shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel.’

The greatest commandment starts with the words “Love the Lord your God with all your heart....” The heart in the Bible is not just about our emotional life, it’s about our will as well. And the only everlasting King that God could appoint was One who would submit Himself completely, and perfectly carry out the will of God.

Jesus would later say John 6:38

for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.

John 17:4

I have brought You glory on earth by completing the work You gave Me to do.

And Jesus was the only Person who did it with **“integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my ordinances....”**

Furthermore, His was a heart willing to be obedient to God even when it led to the cross. Had we no knowledge beyond the crucifixion we would be like the Jews to the present day. Like the Emmaus Road disciples all we would have is the vanished hope that **“he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”** History is littered with fallen kingdoms and royal dynasties that have eventually

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passed into oblivion. And this will continue for as long as there is a history. The cross could have been just one more example of the passing of a leader. But when God promised an everlasting kingdom, He meant exactly what He said. For that to come He had to provide an immortal King. “This Child” was the only Person to be conceived by the Holy Spirit thus making Him God Incarnate, an eternal Being. The resurrection authenticated the nature of His conception. That is why we can sing with absolute confidence that Jesus is *“King forever, ceasing never over us all to reign.” For He is “True God of true God, light of light eternal:”*

Thus, the first three reasons for accepting “This Child” as the prophesied King rest on the covenantal lineage and the character of David and the fact that He is God Incarnate. Yet, in spite of this being the key criteria to identify the Person fulfilling prophecy, the Jews could not accept Jesus. In their dealings with Him they rejected Him as prophet and priest as well as king. Yet there was a remnant who believed. Starting with the disciples and Paul and the generations after them who had believed their message, a worldwide Kingdom has now come into existence with Jesus as its undisputed King. Going back to the very beginning of the writing prophets, we saw that God was not just concerned with His chosen people Israel: every nation in the then known world came under His care and jurisdiction. Our known world comes under the same divine scrutiny. Although many divisions exist in our world, it was prophesied that the coming King will establish a government that will weld its citizens into one people, belonging to one kingdom, with one overarching aim – to bring glory to God and enjoy Him forever.

Malachi 4:2 gives us a picture of how that will come about.

BUT FOR YOU WHO REVERE MY NAME, THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS WILL RISE WITH HEALING IN ITS WINGS.

Our carol combines Isaiah and Malachi and applies this text to kingship.

HAIL THE HEAVEN BORN PRINCE OF PEACE, HAIL THE SON OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

LIGHT AND LIFE TO ALL HE BRINGS RISEN WITH HEALING IN HIS WINGS.....

HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING, GLORY TO THE NEW BORN KING

And prophecy gives us its world-wide perspective.

Isaiah 42:61 **the LORD have called you in righteousness, and I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you, and will make you to be a covenant of the people, for the people and a light of the Gentiles;**

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Isaiah 49:6

..... I will also make you for a light to the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation unto the end of the earth.

Malachi 1:11

My name will be great among the nations from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and a pure offering will be brought to my name because my name shall be great among the nations, says the Lord Almighty.

Apart from themselves, the Jews only recognised one other category of people – the Gentiles. The inclusion of Gentiles in these prophecies indicate that all people will be welcomed by the coming King. Malachi’s reference to the rising and setting of the sun spanning the globe from east to west, is another indication of world-wide inclusion. “This Child” is now recognised all over planet earth as the King of those who have entered into His kingdom, through His atonement for them on the cross.

Again from prophecy we can turn to other texts that give a guarantee of an eternal kingdom.

Isaiah 9:6-7

For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, PRINCE OF PEACE. OF THE INCREASE OF HIS GOVERNMENT AND PEACE THERE WILL BE NO END. HE WILL REIGN ON DAVID’S THRONE AND OVER HIS KINGDOM, ESTABLISHING IT AND UPHOLDING IT WITH JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS FROM THAT TIME ON AND FOREVER. THE ZEAL OF THE LORD ALMIGHTY WILL ACCOMPLISH THIS.

Isaiah emphasizes that it is God who guarantees the existence of the King and the kingdom. The Lord has declared it and His zeal will accomplish it. And royal authority is vested in the only Person who is both God and Man – Mighty God, Everlasting Father - hence there can never be a conflict of interest between divine omnipotence and human fallibility. Because the Sovereign is eternal, Isaiah can then assert that the kingdom will exist “**from that time on and forever.**” – ‘from that time’ being the time when the Child is born, the Son is given. We can also emphasize Isaiah’s mention of no end to the increase of His government for that is being fulfilled in this very day as people enter the Kingdom through faith somewhere in the world on a daily basis.

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Jeremiah too points to the eternal principles which upon which the everlasting kingdom will be built - peace, justice and righteousness. Looking around the world today, we can see that these are the very things that are missing in the governments of the world. Going back to the writing prophets we saw that justice and righteousness are the manifestations of the purity of God and “This Child” would be the means by which God’s standards of justice and righteousness towards a sinful people could be met. For, as Jeremiah says **This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord our Righteousness.** Jesus was the personification of righteousness, and righteousness will characterise His reign.

Isaiah 11

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.....4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; ...Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

And lastly, we stereotype Christmas as the season of peace and goodwill, but unfortunately the world looks for them in every direction, except to the birth of “This Child” who promises all of this to those who will accept His sovereignty over their lives in the here and now. A picture of that peace is given in Isaiah **Isaiah 60:17c-21a I will make PEACE your governor and RIGHTEOUSNESS your ruler. No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders, BUT YOU WILL CALL YOUR WALLS SALVATION AND YOUR GATES PRAISE.....THEN WILL ALL YOUR PEOPLE BE RIGHTEOUS and they will possess the land FOREVER.**

And in 32:16-18 Isaiah joins together righteousness, justice and peace.

16 Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.

That is the vision for the fifth Day of the Lord. And it can only be achieved by “This Child”, who was born to be the Messiah. And when that Day comes, we will no longer need a Prophet, for all that was forth-told and foretold from Genesis to Revelation will have come to pass. We will not need a Priest, for we will have already been presented faultless and perfect before the Father. And, because that is what “This Child” made possible, we will worship Him as King to the glory of the Father for all eternity.

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Messiah, Prophet, Priest and King. No other single person who has ever lived, or who ever will live, could fulfil these roles as God intended them to be lived. Thanks to the writing prophets, I have been given a different, but a more awe inspiring answer to the question “What Child is this?” And, I hope you will agree that, this song, together with Paul’s words to Timothy seem the best way to acknowledge this, for they seem to encapsulate why every Christmas we have a tremendous reason to celebrate the birth of “This Child.”

1 Timothy 6:14-16

I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the BLESSED AND ONLY SOVEREIGN, THE KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen

Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her King;