



THE COMING OF THE CHRIST



For 450 years before the birth of Jesus, the voice of the prophets fell silent. The last of these voices, Malachi, said this:

“These are the words of God the Lord. I will send my messenger to prepare the way for me. Then the Lord you are looking for will suddenly come – and it will be to his own temple. The messenger you long to see will come and proclaim my covenant. I am the Lord, and I do not change. And so you are not lost... I will open the windows of heaven and pour out on you in abundance everything that is good. Then people around the world will call you happy.”

This strain runs through all of the finest minds and visions in what Jesus himself knew as his holy book – and which we know as the Old Testament. As a boy, he would learn these words in his church; as God’s own son, he would know them to be true. Malachi, right at the end of that holy book, had the vision – but it was there right at the beginning too – in the books of the Law, in Numbers, we read:

Balaam knew that the Lord wanted him to bless the people; so he did not go to look for omens, as he had done before. He turned towards the people, and as the spirit of God took control of him, he said this: “This is the message – these are the words of a man who can see clearly and who can hear what God is saying. I see a vision; I look into the future, and I see a king, like a bright star, arising in the nation, coming like a comet.”

At the beginning of the decade in which Jesus would be born, the brightest of all earth-visiting comets, Halley’s Comet, would make a brilliant appearance across the dark skies of earth’s northern hemisphere. It shone for ten days, and drew the attention of star watchers across the globe – including those based in Persia, near Isfahan. The Magi...

Then, four years later, there occurred a unique astronomical chain of events: a close conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the night skies close to Orion, followed by the brightest star in our skies, Sirius, rising brightly towards Orion exactly at dawn on the first day of the Egyptian month *Mesori*, which means *Birth of a Prince*. Then, recorded by astronomers in Korea and China in the year of Christ’s birth, a brilliant supernova – the brightest star of all - visible for six weeks to star searchers like the Magi.



But all this was still to come...

Many people thought that David – that flawed but brilliant warrior king – was the promised one. But David himself didn't. He also had a greater vision. And his last words were recorded in the books of the Kings like this:

David, son of Jesse, was a man whom God made great; a man chosen by God to be king, and a man who was the composer of beautiful songs for God's people. These are the last words he spoke: "The spirit of the Lord speaks through me; this is his message on my lips. The God of Israel has spoken; he said to me 'The king who rules with justice, who rules in obedience to God, is like the sun shining on a cloudless dawn, the sun that makes the grass sparkle after rain. And that is how God will bless my descendants, because he has made an eternal covenant with me, an agreement that will not be broken, a promise that will not be changed.'"

Jeremiah saw this too. He was one of the great prophets – a gloomy, serious and driven man speaking to a downtrodden people. But even he discerned the glory that was to come – and he said *"The Lord says, the time is coming when I will choose as king a righteous descendant of David. His rule will be marked by wisdom; he will stand for what is right and just in the land. When he comes to his reign, the people of Judah will be safe, and the land of Israel will live in peace. And he will be called 'The Lord our Salvation.'"*

And this is the meaning of the name Jesus...

Isaiah, the visionary who gave rise to the greatest of the prophetic lines, saw that God's promise was not just for the Jews, the children of Israel. Son of an aristocratic family, and with a deeply religious nature and upbringing, his vision was for the whole world. Even when his people were in captivity, these words rang out as the true promise of God:

Comfort all my people, says God. A voice cries out "Prepare in the wilderness the way of the Lord – God's way! Valleys will be filled, mountains levelled, and rough going will be made smooth. Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed – and the whole human race will see it. The Lord himself has promised this."



750 years before Jesus was born, another man of vision, Micah, from the hills of Judah, in a moment of true inspiration, saw more than even the time and the royal line, and peace for all the earth. He saw the place. *"The Lord says – Bethlehem in Ephrathah, although you are one of the smallest towns in Judah, out of you I will bring a ruler for God's people, one whose roots lie far back in time and whose family line is from you. The woman who is to give birth will have a son. When he comes, he will rule with the strength and majesty that is from God himself. People all over the earth will acknowledge his greatness, and he will bring peace."*

And it was Isaiah himself – first among prophets – who gave him the title *Sar-Shalom*; the Prince of Peace...

But all this was still to come...

The promise from way back in time reached its first fulfilment in the pregnancy of a teenage girl. While she wondered at the miracle of her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy – a woman far beyond normal childbearing age – she found that she, too, was carrying a child. And as the child grew in her womb, so did the certainty that this was truly God's child. For she also now shared the vision. And she found that her fiancé – the craftsman Joseph, who was of David's direct family – also grew in his certainty that this was their shared vision, their shared responsibility, and a mission of love.



Mary's heart leaped as she found herself speaking the words – the same words from the books of the Kings that had been silent for so many centuries. *“My heart praises the Lord; my soul rejoices because of God my Saviour, for he has recognised me. Everyone should know how happy I am to serve him – generations to come will call me the happy one, because of the great things God in his power is doing. He keeps his promises!”*

Mary's response to God's prompting was at first fearful; then wondering; then with a growing certainty that she was doing the right thing. And she then found herself surrounded and sustained by love.

And so it was that Mary and Joseph found themselves on the road to Bethlehem, the ancestral town of David, just six miles from the heart of Jerusalem – but a lot further from their home town. It's not a journey they would have undertaken lightly, but there was a census ordered, and politics, while claiming to look after the interests of the whole population, as usual seemed to have precisely the opposite effect on these two individuals.

There's no biblical account of any donkey to ease Mary's journey – and she was very near her time. It wouldn't be the first, or last, time she would reflect on the implications – for her – of the words and the vision of those prophets.... Who was it had mentioned a birth in Bethlehem?

There is, however, a beautifully clear and simple story, told by Luke, of how heaven and earth came together that night. He wrote:

“While they were in Bethlehem, her baby's time came. She gave birth to a son – her firstborn – and wrapped him in strips torn from a cloth garment for warmth. Then she laid him in a feeding trough, because there had been no room for them to stay in the roadhouse.



“There were some shepherds in the country nearby, who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks. An angel – from God himself – appeared to them, and they were bathed in the shining light of God's glory. At first they were terrified – but then the angel spoke to them directly, and he said ‘Don't be afraid! I have come with good news – it's for you, and it will bring joy to everyone. This very day your Saviour was born – Christ the Lord. He's in David's town. And this is what will prove it to you – go there, and you will find a baby, wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a feeding trough.’

“Suddenly, there was a great army of heaven's angels with the angel who had spoken – and they all sang praises to God: ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased’...”

The shepherds were clear what they wanted to do. They ran to the town – and there they found Mary, and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. They told everyone gathered there what had happened on the hillside, and what they had been told about the child. Everyone who heard them was amazed. The shepherds returned, actually singing praises to God – while Mary pondered deeply about everything that was happening and what it would mean.

In the time following the birth, it was Joseph's responsibility to name the child. He remembered so clearly what had come to him in a dream, as soon as he had learned that Mary was with child. It was the same dream that had given him the courage and vision to take Mary as his wife, and thus to honour God's wishes. He knew the words were from God's own angel – "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. This is all the work of the Spirit of God himself. Mary will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you will name him Jesus – *God is salvation.*"

Joseph did all that was asked of him. And he it was who named the baby Jesus.



He was not the only one who found guidance from beyond all normal experience. Wise men from far to the East, men who studied the eternal movement of the stars, found themselves driven to seek out the child born to be king. As stars and planets came together as never before or since, they were led, first to David's capital city – Jerusalem; then to the town of his birth and the place of his anointing as king – Bethlehem; and finally to their destination. Matthew tells us their story:

How happy they were, what joy was theirs! The star led them to the place where the child was. They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshipped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and gave them to him.



The men who studied the movement of stars and worlds knelt in the presence of the child; the very creator of stars, and worlds, and universes.

God of God, Light of Light, the Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son.

"Glory to God in the highest heaven; and on earth, peace..."

"This life brought light to humanity..."

We wish you a very happy Christmas, and a blessed New Year.

Clèir Eilean Ì – the Church of Scotland in the Highlands and Hebrides