

We're going to look at scripture together this morning now, and we're looking at Micah chapter 5 verses 2 to 5.

{Reading Micah 5:2-5}

I meant to say to miss out that last little bit about the Assyrians because it's not really relevant to what we're looking at this morning, but I read it anyway because it is part of the scripture.

And what we so often find with the prophecies that we find in scripture is that mixed in there is historical material referring to the particular time that the prophet was writing in and then mixed in we'll find something that has the resonance of an eternal perspective – and that's what we find in this passage that we are looking at this morning. We have references to the nations around Israel and then here in the middle of it we have something that's seems to have a resonance of Eternity, of Gods divine plan from the beginning of time.

So, let's have a look at it for a little while; I'm not suggesting this is how it really looked but there's a possibility of how this scripture might have looked. {Picture of the text of the first verse of the reading on a scroll background.}

Bethlehem Ephrathah: the word “Ephrathah” is there because there were a couple of Bethlehems and so this was defining which Bethlehem was being referred to. This prophecy of the first coming of Jesus Christ (of course we awaits the second coming of Jesus but this first coming of Jesus) was given 700 years as a prophecy – 700 years before Jesus was actually born. It's probably one of the less well-known prophecies about the coming of Jesus, but it's important particularly because it names the town of Bethlehem – it names the place where the Messiah was going to be born. Before Jesus' birth the Jewish scholars used this passage to highlight where the Messiah would be born: they obviously studied the scripture and this one was a key one for Jewish Scholars.

But Jesus who was born there of course was not accepted by the Jewish hierarchy as the Messiah – Jesus wasn't accepted as the Messiah – although interestingly many Jews of course and many priests did become followers of Jesus but the Jewish hierarchy, the high priest – the most high priest – they rejected Jesus as the Messiah. So the Jewish hierarchy had to find a way to explain; well, you know, this passage that refers to Bethlehem – what do we do with that?

Around 100 years after Jesus' birth Orthodox Jewish teaching declared that the Messiah had been born in Bethlehem in the year AD 70 – that was the year that Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans and Jewish belief was that the Messiah came in that year but because of the sins of the Jewish nation, the Jewish people, he had been hidden from them. That was the teaching back then that the Jewish scholars were giving.

But Micah's prophecy here was so specific that actually the birth of the son of David was so accurately pinpointed by these verses that Herod's advisers knew exactly where the Messiah was to be born. So when the Three Wise Men came and said to Herod “we are here to search for the New King who has been born,” Herod turned – I imagine Herod is not a man you wanted to be to be turning towards you and looking at you sternly “Have you got the answer I'm looking for?” you needed to have the answer really if you wanted to make sure your head stayed connected to your neck. But they knew the answer, they said “Yes, we can tell you he will be born in Bethlehem and this is why we know this;” and they read this passage from Micah.

So they knew where the Messiah was to be born but what they didn't know was *how* it was to come about, because actually we know that the Jewish scholars of around this time, they looked at the families living in the Bethlehem area and they couldn't work out how this was going to happen because no families were left who were direct descendants of David, of King David, and so they questioned "Well how can this messiah be born who we are told will be a son of David, how can he be born in this town when there is none of his family that still lives here?" They couldn't see how the prophecy could come true, in those circumstances, but, of course, we know that God can use any circumstances to bring about his will, and in this situation it was the Roman census across the whole Roman Empire: the fact that everyone was told you must return to your place of birth in order to be counted, so that the Roman authorities would know just how many people they had under their power.

And it was – I'm sure the Romans felt they were in charge – but God had an underlying purpose and he use that census, the fact that it caused Joseph to return to his home town and to take with him his pregnant wife Mary, and so they found themselves Bethlehem (he returned to his ancestral home) and this was the way in which these particular verses from Micah were fulfilled.

How often have we experienced that sense of things sometimes just coming together in a way that we would never have planned for it, and it seems as though it's random, but when you look back at it you know it's not random. I was talking to somebody this week who was saying to me "You know it's amazing how something negative can happen but so often the right person is just there at the moment you need them." And isn't that our experience that so often someone is there at the right moment just as we need them? God can use any circumstances to bring about his will.

So, we've looked at the birth of Jesus a little bit, the birth of Christ.

The Kingdom of Christ. So this prophecy, although it's fairly short (only a few verses) the prophecy looked back: "Out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel whose origins are from old from days of eternity." Now that is the alternative, and if you were to look in your Bible you'd find sometimes it will give an alternative translation, and in my Bible the footnotes gives that instead – it can be "from ancient times" or "from days of eternity". Micah here refers to Christ's pre-incarnation, his pre-incarnation: the fact that he, Christ, existed with the Father from before time.

A few weeks ago I expressed myself poorly when I was preaching, and I wanted to take the opportunity now to correct that. I think it's important to correct ourselves when we get things wrong, and so I didn't correctly express myself and so I wanted to clarify my understanding of the nature of Christ our Lord and Saviour. I want to clarify the nature of Christ: since before time, that is since eternity, Christ has been the son of God. However when he came to earth Christ chose to humble himself – we read that in Philippians chapter 2. He chose to subordinate himself to the Father when he came to earth – Paul explains this to us in Philippians chapter 2, and I just want to read you a couple of those verses from Philippians 2. Paul tells us your attitude should be same as that of Christ Jesus:

[reading Philippians 2: 6-10]

So Christ has been the Son of God since before time; he chose to humble himself and subordinate himself to the Father in coming to this earth, and then in his sacrifice the Father has raised him back up into that glory and majesty of his place with the Father in heaven. And not only is he from eternity, from the beginning of time, also he will be to eternity – eternity that the end of this age when time will be no more Christ is eternally the Christ through until the end of time.

I wonder whether Micah realised the full extent and the implications of what he was writing in his prophecy that it would have such, such a breadth of impact of our understanding.

So he was from of old, from days of eternity. Jesus Christ life did not commence with his birth on this earth in Bethlehem – that was simply his unveiling, he existed from before time.

So, the Prophecy looked back but it also looked forward. So it says “He will stand and Shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.” Christ coming to earth was to show the nature of the father's power and majesty. The picture is one of a shepherd which we're going to look at in a little bit more detail in a moment. But the kingdom of Christ has a particular nature. We look at that as we think of the Conquest of Christ; conquest is a military term – it talks about power and it talks about authority to stamp your will upon other people.

And indeed there are some hard words in this passage here – hard words. It prophesied what could be called (it's a bit of a euphemism) “The dispersion of Israel” but actually what that means is that the great and the good of Israel were carried off to Babylon where they became slaves of the Babylonian Empire. A few poorer families, a few people who didn't really matter, continued to live in the area of Israel but Jerusalem itself was destroyed (or was ruined anyway), and we have this sense of the spiritual heart of the Jewish nation being ripped out of it.

The interesting thing is that Faith is a bit like a weed: have you noticed how when your weeding in the garden and you maybe weeding a sort of like a pathway, and you try and get all of those weeds, you know the ones that grow up between the slabs, and you think you've got it out and then few weeks later what you thought you'd removed (there's obviously a little bit of root left there) and it's grown back up again. I'm not a great gardener, but I do like things tidy and it annoys me when the flipping thing grows back up again when I thought I had sorted it out. But faith is like that and when the Israelites, the Jewish nation, found themselves in this most hostile environment where they were surrounded by people who worshipped a different god had very different culture and regarded them as almost worthless – they were slaves in Babylon. But faith is like a weed that grows and so new ways were found to worship; and the new way that they worshipped – now that they could no longer visit the Temple as many Jews did every year – a new way of worshipping developed called “The synagogue” and so they started to meet together in the synagogue, and that first started to happen in exile, and because there were no priests, they started to develop teachers who came to be called “Rabbis”, and the rabbinic idea developed in exile because the people had to find ways to worship when they had lost the Temple and the priestly system.

So, this prophecy is of the dispersion of Israel; it talks about Israel: “You will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour gives birth...” It was 140 years that they were in exile – Mary wasn't in labour for that length of time, it might might have felt like that sometimes – but once again it's a spiritual picture that's been painted for us of a nation waiting as though in childbirth, waiting for something important to happen. “...Until the time will come when she who is in labour gives birth and the rest of his brother's return to join the Israelites.” That sense of the people coming back and finding their spiritual purpose again.

So it prophesies the dispersion of Israel but also it prophesies the Messiah shepherding his flock. The common perspective around the time just before Jesus was born was that this Messiah would be a great warrior, and there had been people who had managed to gain independence for the Jewish nation for a few years and they were called “The Maccabees”, and for a few years they

managed to kick the forces that were dominating them out of Israel and for a few years they were free. Though actually the interesting thing was the Maccabean leaders, they also had to impose some quite unpopular things on the people, and then, of course, the Roman Empire came in and swept all of that away.

So the Messiah was expected to be a great warrior who would free the people from their military masters, but the picture that's actually painted in Micah is one of a shepherd; and that picture of a shepherd is a one of the way that the Shepherd will act with loving care, with protection and with this sense of Salvation coming from the word "to keep safe". So he will show loving care, he will protect, he will keep safe and in that sense he will bring salvation. No wonder Jesus chose to describe himself as the Good Shepherd: he was recognising in passages like this, this picture of a shepherd who would protect and bring safety and protection.

The Conquest of Christ. Christ did not come with ultimate force; Christ conquers not by ultimate force like other empires. The Romans came in with their military might and the people probably quaked in their boots and they longed for someone who would free them from yet another military power empire that would dominate them. But as Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." Christ conquers not by Ultimate Force but by the ultimate expression of love. We'll never get perfect human governance – that will never happen – we can only simply seek to make the best of the human governance that we have. Christ was not trying to bring in a new type of earthly government – his Kingdom is a one that conquers by coming into the hearts and the minds of individuals who then choose to live according to Christ's way and Christ's will. His sacrifice of himself was for us. His sacrifice was for each one of us, but also was a call to us to follow him in humbling ourselves and sacrificing our own desires and our own ambitions to his will.

Let's pray together.

Dear Jesus we thank you for your word that was written down in this book we call The Bible thousands of years ago, and yet Lord we believe that the words in this book when filled by your spirits are living and active and powerful in our lives, and in our world; we believe Lord God that you are active in this world, but so often in secret ways – not in ways that we can trumpet or have in our Media outlets but rather working secretly, quietly. Lord God we pray that your Kingdom will come more and more in this world, in the way that we as human being seek to look out for each other. Lord we pray that our government will seek to respond to the moral call to be supporting and helping those who are in desperate circumstances; we think of countries like Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and other places in our world where things are so tough, so difficult. And Lord God we pray that our government, as we and we as individuals, will seek to do what we can do to show compassion, to be generous in these most difficult circumstances that people are living in right now. But Lord God we pray that you will be with those who are suffering at this time, and we pray that the light of your love will shine in this world, yes at Christmas time but also on into 2022. In your name we pray all these things Lord Jesus amen.