

The extraordinary in the ordinary

TRANSFORMING THE ORDINARY

The more I think about it the more I am convinced that God takes ordinary things and transforms them. We so often look for the spectacular. We so often pray for the spectacular. We so often seek the spectacular. We so often desire the spectacular. Yet it seems to me more and more that God chooses to do most of his work by taking ordinary things and transforming them. If you really wanted to make a big statement to someone you love this Christmas, what would you do? Truth is – if you could – you'd do something spectacular wouldn't you? If you bought a present it would be a big one, it would be something different – something with the "wow!" factor! It would have to be noticed wouldn't it! Yet when God made his entrance into the world he did pretty much the opposite.

Matthew 2 v 1-12 records it this way:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, for this is what the prophet has written:

'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people of Israel.'

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the King, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Wise men, Magi, probably from what is modern day Iraq came to find Jesus. They are very wise – they see the star and discern its meaning. They follow it all the way from the East. They bring with them gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, showing great forethought and respect. We like to think they knew about Jesus coming life, but the truth is they simply brought the best they had to offer him. But where did they go to find him? They understood that he would be a king – so

they went to where a king would live. Trouble is ... they went to the wrong place. This King was born to no fanfare, he made no spectacular entrance into the world. And even the wise men looked in the wrong place. They needed to look in an ordinary stable in an ordinary town. They needed to look for an ordinary young couple with a newly born baby. How many people are looking in the wrong place for the God who is with us? Oh ... he is with us ... we simply can't find him because we're looking in the wrong place.

You see we so often look for the spectacular, we so often seek the spectacular, we so often pray for the spectacular, we so often desire the spectacular, because if God is who he says he is, then that's what he'll do something spectacular. He'll do that in my life, and your life and in the lives of all those who are genuinely wanting to find him. Yet even the wise men looked in the wrong place. People look in the wrong place every Christmas, don't they? They spend money to impress others .. don't they? They prepare more food than they can eat to impress others ... don't they? They visit people they never see any other time of the year and who they don't really like ... because it makes them feel better. They give a little to the poor because it eases their conscience. Perhaps they even cook a meal for the homeless because it's a good thing to do. Somehow, at Christmas, they feel they can mend what is broken by a nice gift, a hearty meal, a short visit or a raving party - when at best it's papering over the cracks. They even go to church – and hear the Christmas story again. Even wise people look in the wrong place.

The King the wise men were looking for was no earthly King and so would not be found as an earthly King. And wise people do not look to earthly things, they look for the King born to an ordinary young Mother and Father in an ordinary stable. The wise men did find the King of the Jews – because the King of the Jews wanted to be found – and he still does! So where are you looking? Friends, is there some way that you are looking for God in the spectacular? And God is quietly, gently but urgently saying – you won't find me there!

Luke 2 v 8-20 reads:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you; You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God and saying.

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So

they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Luke wants to tell us that the Saviour of the world has come. That's what the angels tell the shepherds, the one who will save the people from their sins – not just today – but for all the people of the earth for all generations – has come. In contrast to the wise men from the East, these lowly shepherds weren't even looking for Jesus, and yet the first to know about the transforming event of human history were these very ordinary shepherds. Their lives were transformed by what they heard that night. Their lives were transformed by what they saw when they went to Bethlehem, their lives were never the same again.

Mary was an ordinary teenager looking forward to getting married, yet the master of the universe chooses her to bear the child that will be the saviour of the world. She is greatly troubled by what the angel tells her, she has good reason to be. She is an unmarried virgin who will become pregnant, this will be a scandal – the punishment for which is death by stoning. Her response is extraordinary, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." For Mary this will bring her great pain and great joy and as Philip Yancey states, she embraces both. Mary, he says, is the first person to accept Jesus on his terms, regardless of the personal cost. The extraordinary has come to the ordinary and transformation is now possible. She will bear a son and will give birth and will call him Immanuel – God with us, and this Jesus will be the saviour of the world. When ordinary people accept Jesus on his terms – he is found and the extraordinary in the ordinary becomes possible. Christmas tells us that God chose the most ordinary of ways to make his entrance in the world. There was nothing that could connect him to the status of a King. There was no palace or Royal guest list awaiting him. There was no Royal declaration and fanfare, in fact, no-one connected with Royalty seemed to have any idea of where this King might be born at all. His parents were an ordinary Jewish girl and an ordinary Jewish boy, and the first people to be told what was happening were ordinary shepherds out on a hill. The greatest event in human history – the most extraordinary event that the world has seen – was so ordinary that it went almost unnoticed. But this ordinary event would transform the lives of all those involved and it would transform the lives of thousands and thousands and thousands of ordinary people from that moment on.

There have been many spectacular events in human history that have brought about some kind of transformation; the first spark from the first flint, the rolling of the first wheel; the discovery of penicillin; the first landing on the moon; the invention of the first printing press; the first micro-chip and explosion of the internet. These events did not go unnoticed – but only one event has the power to transform the lives of people and prepare them for eternity. Because we so often look for the spectacular, because we so often pray for the spectacular, because we so often

seek the spectacular, because we so often desire the spectacular, we so often miss it and we miss the transforming power it brings. The car sticker says 'Wise men came to Jesus – they still do!'

But even wise men can look in the wrong place and may need a bit of help. For us not to miss the extraordinary in the ordinary we need to look at Mary's response, transformation happens when we accept Jesus on his terms, and are willing to embrace both the pain and the joy of following him. We do not need to look for the spectacular or seek it because God most often comes in the ordinary and transforms it. If he can do that with the birth of the saviour of the world then isn't it just possible he can do it for you and me?

Preached on 16th December in Crawley Baptist Church