

# Journey

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*Sunday 6 December 2015*

Matt 1<sup>18-25</sup>/Luke 2<sup>1-20</sup>

We're into the second week of Advent this week and if you're anything like me Advent is a strange sort of beast. I don't think I ever heard the word in my childhood and we certainly never celebrated it at home. Instead all we were concerned about was actually getting to Christmas day in one piece. But little by little our Christian brothers and sisters in other more traditional denominations have encouraged us to celebrate this walk up to Christmas in a more specific way – notably by acknowledging the Advent season – the 4 Sundays prior to Christmas Day.

The season of Advent is an old invention. We know that it was practiced by 480 AD and some date it further back than this. But why such a festival? Why establish this as a special season? Is this just for memory's sake? Is the Advent season really just about jogging our memory into reminding us of Christmas? Is it really just to inject a few more candles into the services of worship around the world? Frankly I don't think so.

The so called seasons of the church have quite a specific function and at least a part of this began with the desire all those centuries ago to enable Christians to **enter into the world of the Gospels**. In the absence of not only all the modern media

but also the written word which was not readily available to each believer until after the invention of the modern printing press the Church needed to help believers enter into the world of the Gospels and journey with Christ in other ways and it did this in large part by dividing the calendar year into seasons which were named after sections of the Gospels. So you have Lent, you have Easter, then there's Pentecost and, of course, Advent. By proclaiming and defining set seasons and by celebrating these in special ways with special activities it helped people enter into the Gospels in a very memorable and real way. At the heart of this method is a dynamic which is still very powerful today and which I want to talk about this morning and this is the dynamic of **the journey**.

The journey is, I'm sure, something you are familiar with even if it's not something we think of much. But we all know, I suspect, what it means to go on a journey whether it be simply into town to do some shopping or to another city or town far from here. Journeying is perhaps one of the most basic human experiences. And, if you think about it, the Bible's key moments are almost all defined by a journey.

From Abraham's decision to move to the Promised Land to Israel's return to it hundreds of years later the OT is made of up key journeys. And the NT is really no different. Jesus' birth is woven around the journey of his parents to Bethlehem where He is born and there are many other journeys within the

nativity cycle which I'll get back to shortly. Jesus's life and ministry is defined physically by a travelling ministry and by His journey to the Cross. The Church's life is defined by several key journeys such as Paul's 3 Missionary journeys and the great diaspora of Christians out of Jerusalem and into the wider Roman world where churches would be established which would become the lifeblood of the faith for all the years it faced persecution. The concept of mission is based around the idea of journey and may be summed up in one very simple word 'Go!'

'Journey' is everywhere in our faith and it is especially in this season Advent.

Advent isn't just one journey it is many. It is the journey of two people, Mary and Joseph from relative obscurity to the very centre of God's plan for redemption. It is the journey of two other people – relatives of Mary, Zechariah and Elizabeth, from childlessness and hopelessness to miraculous parenthood. It is the journey of two first-time parents from home to Bethlehem in difficult and untimely circumstances so that Mary must have her child in a stable. It is the journey of shepherds from anonymous rural workers to heralds of God's redeeming grace. It is the incredible journey of wise men from the east, many hundreds of miles to pay obeisance to One whom they know as King. It's the journey of an old widow and a righteous old man to a Temple where Jesus is circumcised and where they get to see the One they've been waiting for for many years.

It's the journey of Jacob, Mary and Jesus out of Israel and down to Egypt to escape the murderous King Herod and it's the journey back again, this time to Nazareth where they will settle. **The whole story out of which Christmas arises is just one journey after another and this cannot be coincidence.** Rather there must be something about journey which God can use and which is resonant with the Kingdom of God. And there is...

Journey's provide four things which are vital I believe, for God's purposes for us and for the Kingdom of God.

1. Goal
2. Purpose
3. Sense of progress
4. Basis of relationship

When Fran and I decided in 2002 to take our three children for a trip around the North Island we did so because we were pretty sure we'd not have many chances to have the whole family together like this again. We wanted to make our summer holiday something special so we talked it over and decided together to make it work – to go on a journeying holiday. We made many decisions after that. Big decisions and little decisions. We bought a new van so that we'd be safer travelling all that way. We booked tickets across on the Ferry. We arranged places to stay. We talked about places we wanted to

visit. We did all those things for one reason – because we had a goal – North Island or bust. The journey was the result of a goal which required the journey. The goal called forth from us a journey and the journey then required us to make some significant decisions.

When we make God our goal we can expect to begin a series of journeys. Journeys of growth within and of purpose without. Journey's both physical and spiritual and emotional. Journeys which may take us where we do not want to go but where we have to go to complete the goal. And that's the interesting thing about having a goal – it will often require us to go where we'd rather not go or where we wouldn't chose to go without the goal. But we do go there because we have a goal in mind. Journeying and goals are inseparable even in the case of refugees who journey largely to escape from something.

Journeys also require and call forth **purpose** from us. When you decide to go somewhere then so much of what you do becomes directed towards reaching that destination. All of life takes on that one purpose – **to get there**. Catching planes is a bit like this. Especially when you're in an international terminal and your ticket says to be at this gate by this time your life's purpose **becomes finding that gate and getting to it**.

Notice again that purpose is not something neutral – it's not a general principle but it's something defined in these biblical events **by God**. Joseph's life had certain purposes before he

became betrothed to Mary. No doubt he would've been a good husband and would've provide well for his family. But when Mary became pregnant those purposes actually caused him to consider abandoning Mary because of the shame of becoming pregnant outside of wedlock. At this point God steps in and says to him basically – I have a new purpose for your life Joseph and it is to take care of Mary who will give birth to my Son who will change the world. Now notice please because this is really important. God's purpose is not **against all the things Joseph has been doing**. God doesn't criticise his training or his sense of right or wrong or even his basic instincts. **Rather God simply calls Joseph to look a little higher – to have a higher purpose in his life which He God will provide**. And this friends is what we too should look for. What is Your higher purpose in life? What is your deeper way? What purpose is God calling you towards which is higher than the purpose Your life has now?

<sup>24</sup> **[And]When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.'** Will we simply obey God's purpose for our lives? Will we look to something higher for ourselves?

Journey gives us a **sense or a measurement of progress**. One of the most obvious results of being on a journey is that you know you're moving and you know when you're not moving. When we look out of a moving car or train or bus or plane we general know when we're moving or when we're standing still. Progress

is obvious except, of course, if you get on the wrong bus. 10 years ago Fran and I were able to spend a couple of days in Paris and in order to get as much in as possible we travelled around Paris from dawn till very late at night on both days. We used the underground to get places and we walked for the rest of it. But Paris has a slightly confusing underground in that the main railroad system is on the same maps as the underground system and to make matters worse they name some of the stations in the underground the same as stations on the main railroad. So on the first day out we got onto an underground to go home very late at night – after midnight – and headed towards the underground station which was near our motel. When we got out and went up to the street level we didn't recognise it at all because we'd inadvertently gone to the railroad station rather than the underground station. The motel turned out to be only a few kilometres from where we were so we were able to walk there but only after we got instructions from a helpful person.

Journey gives us a living sense of progress. Are we getting closer to our goal? Are we moving? Are we getting there? God, I believe, helps us to know that we are getting there. God likes us to have a sense of progress – individually and corporately but to do so we need a God-given goal and a sense of purpose. Jesus clearly had these in His life and at various times He shared His goal with His close friends who just couldn't quite understand them. This is something we should bear in mind. Our friends may not understand our goals, may not identify with them, may

even stand against them as Peter did only moments after He made the first public confession that Jesus was the Christ.

Finally journey provides for us a firm basis for relationship. Those on the train or plane with us can be sure of one thing – they are all going to the same place. This is the key shared reality of a journey – we go together and if you aren't going to the same place you won't be journeying together. But if we are journeying together we have a basis for relationship which is incredibly strong since it doesn't depend on such tenuous variables as whether we are a natural fit for each other, whether we like the same TV programmes, whether we think the other person is good looking or not or whether they come from the right side of town. Notice how no one asks these questions when they're getting on a plane. No one says to the person next to them – I don't think you should be on this plane because you're not good looking enough for me! The shared journey is enough to form at least a formal relationship.

This is so true of the Kingdom of God. What binds us together is our shared journey with God and that's enough. If you think I'm ugly or that my clothes aren't colour coordinated enough or my hair could do with cutting – well tough! We're in this together for other reasons. Those things are always secondary on a journey.

Advent helps us to journey with those who were involved in and witnessed the birth of Jesus. It helps us into a journey which has



become central to the history of the universe. Jesus invites us today to begin journeying with Him. We don't have to know exactly where He's going just as we don't tell the pilot of the plane where to go. Our job is to trust the pilot – to trust Jesus. Are we willing to do that together? Are we willing to trust Jesus with our plane?