Second Sunday of Advent: Peace of Mind

Scripture – Matthew 1:18-25

Introduction

* Bookshops have never been so full of books on spirituality and religion. There’s more and more content on mindfulness, the power of self, the supernatural, Buddhism, prayer … and at the heart of it is that which humankind is constantly seeking – some form of inner peace.

Context

* The second Sunday in Advent is traditionally when we light the candle of peace. While thoughts are often focused on peace on earth, it’s hard to strive for outward peace until peace is found within and with God.
* Matthew 1:18-25 gives us the account of Jesus’ birth through Joseph’s eyes, and it takes a sober tone.
* Customarily a young man’s parents would choose a young woman to be engaged to their son. Before the actual marriage, official arrangements and an ancient form of agreement were held before witnesses, which was a legally binding contract and could be broken only by a formal process of divorce.
* Despite being pledged to be married to Mary (v18), upon hearing that she was pregnant, and knowing that the baby wasn’t his, must have brought Joseph an immense sense of fear, doubt and despair. Sexual unfaithfulness during that period was considered adultery, and under the Mosaic Law carried the death penalty by stoning (Deuteronomy 22:23-24).
* The shame seemed too much for Joseph, and with a desire to maintain his personal righteousness and still protect Mary, he had plans to secretly divorce Mary (v19).
* But in this whole situation, there are four words that the angel of the Lord says to both Joseph (v20) and Mary (Luke 1:29) in their individual unique circumstances: ‘Do not be afraid.’
* The angel announces that Mary was going to give birth to Jesus, Emmanuel, the One whom Israel had been waiting for for 2,000 years. We can easily imagine the circumstances still potentially weighing in Joseph’s heart and mind, but he trusts the angel’s words and takes Mary as his wife (v24).
* In Matthew 2:13 we read of Joseph’s second angelic visitation. This time, the fear of Herod killing Jesus makes him obey without question and flee with his family to Egypt.
* Maybe in this moment, when his life was once again turned upside down, he had a deeper sense of peace that God was in control. Maybe he remembered the eventual peace of mind that would have come with his decision to place his trust and obedience in God when he chose to stay with Mary. He now had a greater assurance of just how precious and special his son was.

Reflection

* The problems of life can easily bear down on us sometimes and our peace can so quickly disappear. We can find it hard to find rest, physically, mentally and spiritually, when circumstances seem out of our control or when we face difficult decisions. When our mind is being attacked it brings added pressures such as fear and anxiety and we long for comfort and respite.
* Quite often we have little control over the lack of external peace in our immediate surroundings and globally, but we can have control over our own inner peace.
* Isaiah 26:3 reminds us that God ‘will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast’ or ‘stayed on him’ (*ESV*) when we trust him. He is the source of peace, a relationship with him brings peace, serving him brings peace, trusting him brings peace.
* Take some moments to honestly assess the condition of your mind right now. Is it full of the ‘stuff of life’? What do the words ‘Do not be afraid’ mean to you in your current state of mind? It is one of the most common commands in Scripture. What would it look like for you to claim this angelic promise for your own life right now?

Prayer

Father, in those times when I am anxious and tired and my mind is racing, I pray that you would lavish your peace on me, through your Holy Spirit. Give me the strength to seek you, to trust you, to focus my thoughts and attention on you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.