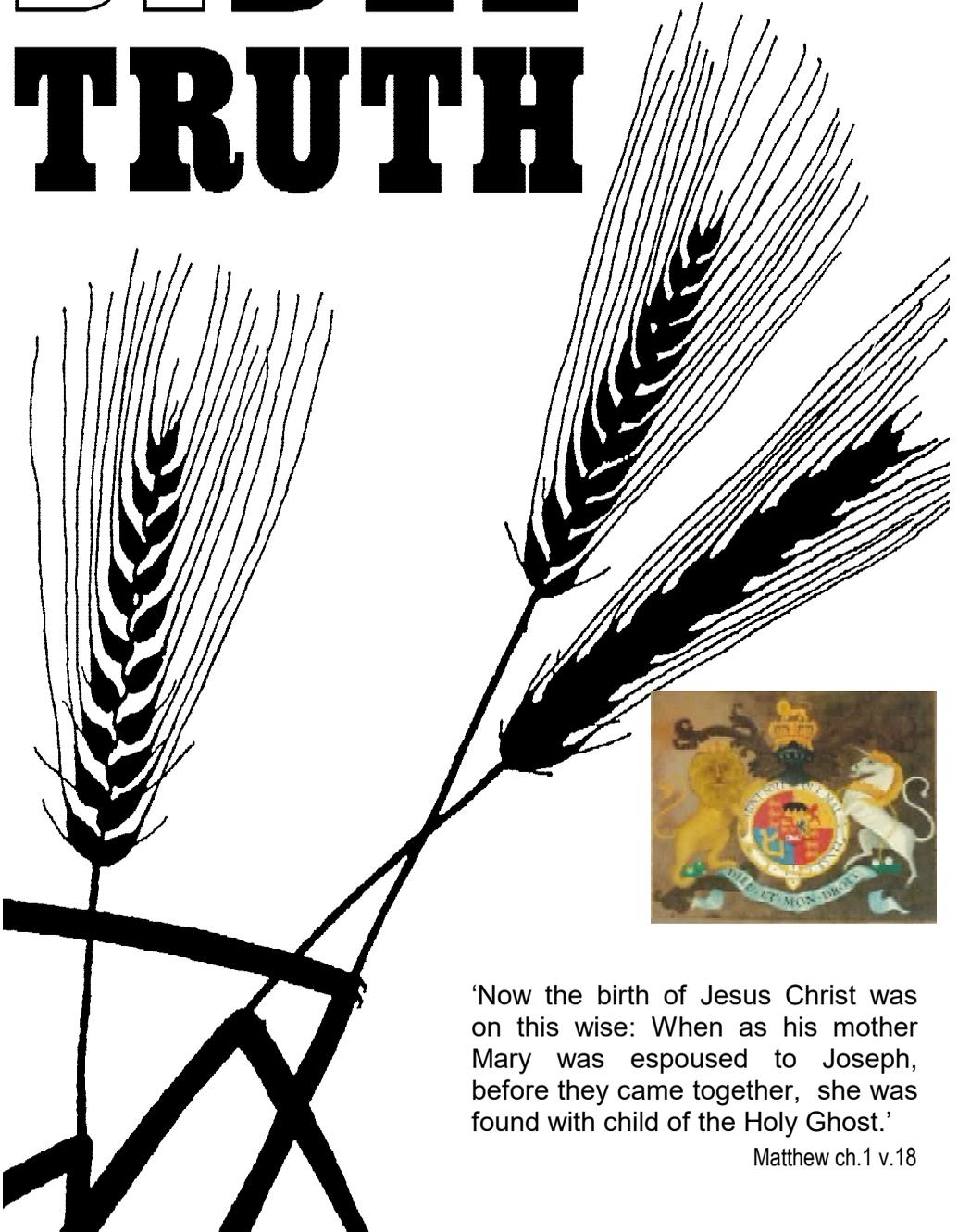


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'Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.'

Matthew ch.1 v.18

TAKE GOD SERIOUSLY

by Pastor John

Recently I read of an unnerving experience which happened to a pastor and his wife who were flying back from a Christian conference. The conduct they witnessed teaches us a great deal about human behaviour and attitudes.

They were flying from Portland back to Los Angeles and all seemed to be going well. All of a sudden while food was being served, the plane banked sharply. Moments later, flight attendants took back all the trays of food and they could be seen quietly whispering among themselves. There was clearly something very wrong. The pilot then came on and said 'We have a slight mechanical difficulty. We are going to fly back to Portland.'

When the plane touched down at Portland airport a flight attendant announced 'Listen carefully everyone. As soon as we come to a stop, you'll hear the emergency siren. At that moment, take the closest escape route you can. Some of you will need to use the slides'. Then she added 'There is a bomb threat. Take nothing with you, just get out!'

To the sheer amazement of the pastor and his wife, instead of panic and people running for the doors, quite the opposite happened. Most people first started reaching for their belongings under their seats and one person actually insisted on getting his brief case from the overhead locker. It was clear that many people simply didn't take the warning seriously.

In the Bible, there are many examples of people who treated Divine warnings about their conduct and life style with a similar casual attitude. Every one of them eventually discovered however, that those warnings to repent were absolutely true. All these examples have much to teach us, but the story of what happened to a certain King of Judah when he rejected the warnings of God's Word is particularly worth relating.

Around 600 BC, during the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah, there was a King of Judah called Jehoiakim. He rejected Almighty God and His Commandments so the result was moral and religious decay throughout the nation. Interest in God and obedience to His will declined to such a degree that the Lord gave Jeremiah a divinely inspired warning which was to be read out to the leaders and people. The warning was stark. Unless the nation repented and turned back to the True God, they would be invaded by a foreign power and destroyed.

Courtiers read this to King Jehoiakim while he was staying at his winter palace. The account in Jeremiah chapter 36 relates that a fire was burning on the hearth and as the King heard the Word of God being read out, he cut the scroll into pieces and burnt them on the fire. He utterly refused to take the warnings of God seriously and because he didn't like the message, he destroyed it. His behaviour and contempt for the Word of God brought terrifying consequences. Shortly afterwards the entire nation was invaded and severe judgement fell upon him personally as well as his family.

As shocking as his behaviour was, it is sadly little different from the way many people treat the inspired Word of God today. They pick and choose the verses they like in Scripture and just like Jehoiakim reject the parts which they find personally and morally challenging. No wonder they don't feel God close to them. Salvation, intimacy and closeness to the Lord is a blessing reserved only for those who take all of His will seriously. It is not for pickers and choosers who behave like a modern day Jehoiakim.

The writer Francois Fenelon gives a moving description of what this intimacy and closeness means in practise. 'You can tell God all that is in your heart, just as one would unload one's heart, its pleasures and its pains to a dear friend. You can tell Him your troubles and He will comfort you, you can tell Him your longings and He will purify them, you can tell Him your dislikes and He will help you to conquer them. Talk to Him of your temptations and He will shield you from them, show Him the wounds of your heart and He will heal them. Honestly lay bare your indifference to good, your depraved tastes for evil and your instability. Tell Him how self-love makes you unjust to others, how vanity tempts you to be insincere and how pride disguises you to yourself and others.'

‘When you pour out to Him all your weaknesses, needs and troubles there will be no lack of what to say. You will never exhaust the subject and you will have no secrets from Him. Blessed indeed are those who have such a familiar, unreserved and intimate relationship with God.’

Such people are easy to recognise. They have a genuine passion and thirst for the Lord, with an unquenchable enthusiasm and drive to stay close to Him. It can be seen in their lives that the Spirit of God resides in their hearts. They display an inner joy and peace which radiates out for all to see. In a way, eternal life has already begun for them and the joy of the Lord is upon their countenance.

Those who refuse to fully submit to the Word of God are denied all this joyful intimacy and owing to the deceitful nature of sin may not even be aware of their true spiritual condition. Like King Jehoiakim they may actually feel quite comfortable and confident with their pick and mix views. They might take some, or perhaps none, of God’s Commandments and warnings seriously and feel very positive about rejecting and ignoring the rest. Scripture often makes references to such people and states that they are deceiving themselves and deceiving those around them. All of God’s Commandments and all His warnings revealed in Scripture, are to be taken seriously and acted upon; none of them can be ignored.

The Bible further adds that some of these self-deceivers will even have a certain religious persona about them and perhaps even have the appearance of being spiritual.

‘Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.’

2 Timothy ch. 3 v. 5

It also says,

‘This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me.’

Matthew ch.15 v.8

They feel quite comfortable about attending church services and singing God’s praises, but in their heart of hearts they do not have a relationship with Him because they refuse to fully submit to and accept His revealed will. As in Matthew it warns,

'Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity'.

Matthew ch.7 vv 22-23

There is a certain plant in South America which starving people will chew, because it gives them the enjoyable sensation of having been fed. Through its influence all desire for real food departs and the starving person is spared from the painful gnawing of hunger. The leaf contains a drug but no nourishment. It satisfies a man's craving but it does not provide for his needs. It is a plant of deception. He feels he has had food, but in reality he is dying for lack of it. So likewise are those who pick and mix from the Bible, choosing for themselves what moral teaching to take seriously and what to reject. They take enough of it to make them feel good, satisfying the inner craving of their religious nature, but reject the morally challenging parts which would have fed and saved their souls. They feel they are spiritually alive and in 'good standing' with the Lord, but in reality they have deceived themselves. Unless they take seriously all of His moral teaching as revealed in Scripture, they will never belong to Him and never be one of His children.

Self-deception is so easy that St Paul urges every person to examine their heart, in order to check that they really do belong to the Lord.

'Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?'

2 Corinthians ch.13 v.5

Let us learn the lesson of Jehoiakim and not be deceived and punished as he was. Provided we take all the teaching and warnings of Scripture seriously, and sincerely endeavour to submit our lives to His will, then when He comes or calls, He will say 'Well done good and faithful servant', rather than 'Depart from Me because I never knew you'.

More life affirming articles by this writer can be found on www.internetpulpit.co.uk
