

ALLEN HALL PUBLIC LECTURES

Finding Christ in the Old Testament

I'm going to start by doing something I tell everybody not to do. I'm going to quote a verse from scripture and then apply it in a context for which it was not originally intended. But I hope we'll see by the end of this lecture that it applies very well to the matter at hand. It's from Mark 10:9:

What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.

It's said by Jesus in the context of questions about marriage and divorce and it refers to the marital bond. Now I don't want to get into that subject here, but basically Jesus says this because many of his contemporaries are treating marriage too lightly and allowing divorce for the flimsiest of pretexts, and he sees that the marriage bond is essential for the good of society as a whole. Now let me apply this out of context to the Bible. If like me you had a Christian upbringing, you would have learned in school that the two testaments of the Bible are linked. In the Old Testament there are lots of passages that predict or prophesy or promise the coming of Jesus, sometimes clearly and explicitly, sometimes in a much more veiled and enigmatic way, and in the New Testament these things come true in Jesus.

And if like me you had anything to do with the study of scripture, either in a seminary, a university, at A level or even just reading modern books about the subject, you probably learned that this was all wrong, it was wishful thinking by people hundreds of years after the OT was written. From the 18th century onwards many scholars started to assume (and teach) that when Christian writers said that something happened to fulfil scripture, they were fantasising. So for instance John says at the end of the passion account:

For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled, "Not a bone of him shall be broken." And again another scripture says, "They shall look on him whom they have pierced." (John 19:36-37)

Scholars said that the author of the fourth gospel is imposing an interpretation on those texts that is completely alien to their original meaning. Or when the author of Matthew is talking about the birth of Jesus he quotes Isaiah 7:14 and says:

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:22-23)

People argued he is similarly quoting Isaiah out of context and imposing on that text a meaning which the prophet Isaiah never intended it to have, and the child he refers to is the young king Hezekiah, not Jesus. Take this from a seventies author writing about Matthew: "Ignoring the context and doing violence to the original meaning, the evangelist fits the ancient words by force into a

contemporary Christian Context.”¹ I was told things like that right through my time in seminary, although thankfully not all our scripture profs took that line.

All the NT authors assumed that the Jesus story was the fulfilment, the climax, the final sweet fruit of a single story with many twists and turns and subplots that had been going on since chapter 1 of Genesis. The fathers all assumed the same. As the Catholic Church put the Bible together over a couple of centuries, her leaders were working with that assumption. In fact just over a hundred years into her existence, a character called Marcion started teaching that we don't need the OT, indeed we shouldn't read it, that the God who appears in its pages is a bloodthirsty monster, completely different to the God of Jesus. In a sense he did us a favour in forcing the Church to react to this teaching, to declare it a heresy, a perversion of the truth and that basically the writings of the OT are every bit as much Christian scriptures as the gospels or the letters of St. Paul. For most of the Church's history all Christians simply assumed that the Bible is one thing in two inseparable parts. St Augustine put it memorably in this little Latin rhyme:

Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet, et in Novo Vetus patet. (The New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old is opened up - in the New.

Or: the new is in the old concealed and the old is in the new revealed.)²

No one doubted this until the 18th century, the so-called Enlightenment and the rise of what we could call modern biblical scholarship. (Although here in 2020 with wonderful resources at hand for the study of scripture, none of which were available when I was ordained, a lot of that so-called 'modern scholarship is decidedly old hat.) So by the end of the 18th century instead of reading the whole of the Bible as one story people started to split the Old and New Testaments, to treat them as though they had not very much to do with each other. Basically scholars doubted or denied that God was the divine author behind the whole Bible. The Bible is not one book but seventy three. So that's why this evening I want to pluck that saying of Jesus out of its original context and apply it to what people have done to the Bible and repair it.

What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.

In the prologue to his gospel John has told us that the Word – Christ - is the light that enlightens everyone. He makes it clear that he has existed from the very beginning and he says:

The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.
(John 1:9-11)

¹ CDF Moule *The origin of Christology* Cambridge 1977 p.128

² cf. "*Quaest. in Hept.*," 2, 73: *Collected Works of Latin Church Writers*, 28, III, 3, p. 141.

Here he is talking about the presence of Christ in the World before Jesus was born. Eventually he says,

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

That's what we celebrate at Christmas, but John tells us explicitly that he'd been busy in the world for many centuries before that. Sometimes things almost jump of the page at you. When you read the Suffering Servant Song in Isaiah 53 for a Christian it's impossible not to think of Jesus.

But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5-6)

But there are other places where either the NT writers or the Fathers have seen Jesus in ways that aren't nearly so obvious. But let me slightly paraphrase St. Augustine and say what I believe and the Church believes to be one of the basic truths about the Bible:

Jesus is in the Old Testament concealed

And the full meaning of the Old is in Jesus revealed.

Perhaps a couple of analogies would help here. I've known several people who discovered they were dyslexic during their higher education, and that discovery profoundly changed their lives. They could not change the facts of their lives up to that point, but nevertheless their previous history began to mean something quite different. Many such people were regarded as dim or lazy, and they may have even regarded themselves as not very bright because they don't seem to achieve much academically. And then they were diagnosed as dyslexic and given the help they needed to overcome this hurdle, and they prospered academically. The thing that made all the difference was the diagnosis, and they began to understand their personal history in a very different light. They thought that their failure meant one thing; in fact it meant something rather different. In a similar vein, I know someone who only in his late fifties was diagnosed as autistic, and suddenly some of his behaviour which was incomprehensible to himself and those who knew him started to make sense.

I use these two rather negative examples as an analogy for what happens with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus meets two disciples who are probably still suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, and he shows them that what had happened to him was part of a larger plan:

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. (Lk. 24:27)

So, according to Luke, this isn't a reading of the OT cooked up after the crucifixion, it's the opinion of Jesus himself. He expresses the same thing also in John 5. Arguing with the Jews he says:

You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; (Joh 5:39.)

We don't know which passages Jesus refers at Emmaus to but we can be almost sure that he mentioned the suffering servant song in Isaiah 53. Written almost 600 years before the crucifixion, it talks of someone who all his life displayed the classic signs that God was against him: The crowd speak and say how they were convinced God had cursed him.

.....he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. (Isaiah 53: 3-4)

Probably they were the people who brought about his death. They start to realise against all odds that God does not share their opinion, that God takes the side of this innocent victim. The crowd in this reading undergo a kind of conversion. They realise God was not working through them to condemn and persecute the servant. God was working through the servant. But God was not just giving tit for tat. He did not just turn the tables and use the servant to condemn or punish the crowd. The servant somehow is the instrument of their salvation and healing. I once heard a Rabbi talking about this passage and saying that although he had studied it and prayed with it at great length he did not see Jesus in it. Well of course not, neither did these disciples until they met the risen Lord. The risen Christ is the key to the whole of the scripture.

In a certain sense what Jesus does on the road to Emmaus is canonise the OT for the Church. He reveals the plot, the story line for the whole of the Bible and shows that what has happened over the last few days is in accordance with the scriptures.

Not too surprisingly, as soon as the apostles start to preach after Pentecost they do so to their Jewish brethren in terms of the OT. They are absolutely convinced that what has happened with Jesus is not so much predicted as prefigured and the OT is littered with texts that show how God works and that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the best illustrations of the truth of those texts. A good example is Psalm 118:22:

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is quoted five times in the NT. It's not so much that the verse is a direct prediction of the passion and resurrection. It's that the OT bears witness to the surprising, unexpected way God works. There is plenty to say that those rejected by people are the ones God often uses best. (The story of Joseph rejected by his brothers who becomes their rescuer from famine, the story of Samuel's choosing of David, the youngest son who isn't even in the running to be king, to give just two examples.) What was perceived by Israel, perhaps somewhat dimly, is made dazzlingly clear by the resurrection of Jesus. The Jews who become the first converts to Christianity do so, at least in part, because they realize that what the Apostles proclaim about Jesus is consistent with what their scriptures teach. It's not a natural progression, but it makes sense, given the resurrection.

As I said there are lots of places in the OT where Jesus seems to jump of the page at you. I'm not going to look at any of those tonight, but I'll try to look

at the just a few of the places where the connection with Jesus is not at all obvious, some would say far-fetched, and hopefully show Jesus shining through even these sometimes obscure passages. But where do we find the first clue to Jesus hiding in the OT. And if I can use that image, when someone really is hiding from others, there are various things that can give them away, the perfume they are wearing, the rumbling of their stomach, many other things. So we first detect Christ hiding in Genesis 1: we don't see his face, but we smell his cologne, there is a hint of his presence, not visible to the naked eye but to the eyes of faith. All the way through this chapter the author speaks about God in the singular, it's very clear. Every single verb used of God is third person masculine singular, he created, he made, he say etc. But when we get to the creation of man we read:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. (Gen. 1:26)

No longer third person singular but first person plural. And this isn't the only place we find this strange phenomenon. After the fall in the Garden of Eden we read:

Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; (Gen. 3:22)

In ch. 11 when God sees what the people at Babel are up to he says:

Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, (Gen. 11:7)

Surely when this was written Israel was doggedly monotheist, why the sudden hint that there may be more than one 'person' in the deity. Commentators have tied themselves in knots trying to explain this. The sudden use of the plural here has baffled scholars for years. Some have suggested that this is a re-working of a pagan creation story involving many gods and the author has, by mistake, left this in. This is ludicrous. Even if the former were true this is such a carefully crafted piece of writing that the author would not make such a glaring doctrinal error, building polytheism into the opening chapter of his work. Jewish commentators have held that God is addressing his heavenly court, angels, sons of God etc. Early Christian writers saw here a reference to the Trinity. We may understand that as the *sensus plenior*, after all Jn. 1:1-3 sees Christ as actively involved in creation. John talking about Christ the Word says:

all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. (Jn. 1:3)

You get exactly the same idea in the letter to the Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; 16 for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities -- all things were created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:15-17)

Now is this pure wishful thinking on the part of those NT writers. I would suggest no, but that just as on the road to Emmaus the disciples only begin to understand

the full deep meaning of the OT in the light of Christ's resurrection, the same is true here. In Ephesians Paul says that Jesus was sent by God:

to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; (Ephesians 3:9))

Christ hides in the OT, but in these three instances in Genesis 1,3 and 11, you could say that the author lets the cat out of the bag, a bit, maybe unwittingly. The Trinity didn't come into being when Christ was born. The Trinity was there before creation began. And my guess is that divine pedagogy, in forming a separate people, who would be different to all the others and a light to the world, God had to wean people off polytheism, had to stop them worshipping multiple gods and deities. It would have been almost impossible to do that and at the same time reveal himself as three. So he first reveals himself as one, but nevertheless, providentially leaves a few hints that there is more to the story than this. And there is at least one more hint

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

So there are two figures here, the Son of Man and the Ancient of Days. If we read the whole context here this Son of Man clearly is a heavenly being and is once again, rather late, a hint that there may be more to the Godhead than oneness. And how does Jesus constantly refer to himself? Son of Man. 80 times and in all the gospels. He's saying to people in the clearest possible terms that he is the one of whom Daniel spoke in that prophesy.

The Protoevangelium.

In Genesis 3:15, just after the fall in the Garden of Eden we find a saying which is known as the Protoevangelium or the first announcement of the gospel. God says this to the serpent:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

So both the woman and her seed, her offspring will be enemies of the snake. When I first started teaching Genesis more than 20 years ago I consulted many commentaries and they tended to say that this is an explanation of why human beings hate snakes and why snakes are so willing to strike people. The more I reflect on that the more I think how lame and uninspiring this is. There may well be an element of truth there, but if you lived in a country where poisonous snakes are plentiful, you'll know that no one really needs this explaining to them.

Christian commentators from Justin (c. 160 AD) and Irenaeus (c. 180 AD) have regarded this v. 15 as the *protoevangelium*, the first messianic prophesy in

the Bible, and they saw it fulfilled in Jesus victory through his cross and resurrection. Listen to Irenaeus:

"For this end did He put enmity between the serpent and the woman and her seed, they keeping it up mutually: He, the sole of whose foot should be bitten, having power also to tread upon the enemy's head; but the other biting, killing, and impeding the steps of man, until the seed did come appointed to tread down his head, - which was born of Mary, of whom the prophet speaks: 'Thou shalt tread upon the asp and the basilisk; thou shalt trample down the lion and the dragon (Psalm 91:13).'"³

The Hebrew text says that it is the woman's seed (her offspring) which would crush the serpent's head. They were not inventing this out of thin air. Third century BC Jewish Targums (translations of the Bible into Aramaic, often with commentary woven in) see the serpent as symbolic of Satan and look for a victory over him in the days of the messiah. So ultimately Christ, the offspring of the Woman crushes the head of the serpent, defeats Satan. But note the prophesy also says.

and you will strike his heel."

So yes, Jesus crushes the serpent, but the serpent also bites him, kills him. It seems on Calvary that all the sin, all the evil in the world lands on Jesus, he cops the lot and dies, by so doing wins his victory.

I'd like to leave the main road for a minute or two and pursue a side road. One of the commonest images of our Lady known to Catholics is of her trampling a serpent underfoot. But if it is the woman's offspring who is going to crush the serpent, then what is she doing in the picture? St Jerome who made the Latin translation of the Bible we call the Vulgate, translated this verse as:

Inimicitias ponem inter te et mulierem, et semen tuum et semen illius. Ipsa conteret caput tuum.

So the DRA which is translating the Latin Vulgate says:

she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel.

So the woman is the one who is going to crush and the link was forged with Mary who from earliest times was seen as the new Eve, and before she was given any of the titles by which we know her the Church understood this. This is certainly implicit in the Gospel of John but if we read it with first century Jewish eyes, then fairly quickly it becomes explicit.

So how does Jerome get away with translating 'he' as 'she'? For many years I wondered did Jerome have a different Hebrew manuscript different to the one we have, or did he just take a liberty? Neither. First of all, some of the earlier Latin translations known as the *Vetus Latina* translate this in the feminine – *ipsa* – rather than the masculine, so Jerome does not invent this translation. And this gets rather technical but it's fascinating. The word for he in Hebrew is *hu'* the word for she is *hi'* and in Hebrew letters they are written differently aWh... and

³ St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, Chapter 23, Number 7

ayhi But in the Pentateuch they are written with exactly the same letters but are pronounced differently. Why this is nobody seems to know, even the most technical linguistic works on the subject can't offer a satisfactory explanation. This is though a phenomenon well known in the Hebrew Bible as *ketiv qere*. Literally one thing is written, but something slightly different is read. But what is important here is that when St. Jerome saw those three letters – *He, Waw, Aleph*, he could translate that word as 'he' or 'she' and in both cases be right. So instead of translating it as referring to the woman's seed – he – he makes it refer to the woman – she - and that's perfectly OK as well. So for Jerome it's the woman who will crush the serpent. And this must refer to some woman in the future because poor Eve is in no position to crush any serpent or win any victory over evil. Fast forward now to John's gospel and the wedding feast at Cana She appears twice in John, at Cana and at the foot of the Cross. Jesus addresses her twice and both times she is called 'Woman.'

Remember that the first chapter of John's gospel is written in such a way as to echo the creation account in Genesis and when we meet Mary at Cana, if we count up all the days that are mentioned in ch. 1, it's the 7th day of the new creation. Some see the address 'Woman' as Jesus putting Mary in her place, and even suggest that 'Woman' is a term of abuse. In our culture it would certainly sound like that. But if you look at what subsequently happens, how Jesus acts on what she says and provides wine superabundantly, this cannot possibly be true. If he were telling her to mind her own business then he would not have done anything about the wine. The title 'Woman' deliberately evokes Eve. She is called woman ten times in chs. 2 & 3 of Genesis and only after that is she named Eve. So in the Garden of Eden on the seventh day of creation the first woman, led the first man, Adam into sin and thus losing his glory. Here at Cana the New Eve, Mary leads the New Adam Jesus into displaying his glory. Remember the story finishes:

This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

In Genesis 3:20 we read:

The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

At the foot of the cross, by giving Mary as mother to the Beloved Disciple she becomes the mother of all those who believe, of all those who live through him, clearly deliberately, the New Eve. We meet her again finally in the book of Revelation.

And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; 2 she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. 3 And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them

to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth;

There is no doubt that the snake represents Satan the power of evil. Yes Christ will defeat him, but Mary will also be instrumental in that. The image we find in Revelation 12 of the woman clothed with the sun being attacked by a dragon must relate to this. The author tells us:

And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.

In the Garden of Eden that creature appears as a little snake, nothing terrifying, it just makes a few suggestions to Eve. But in Revelation we see that power for what it is; something huge, aggressive and very destructive. The serpent strikes at the women, at Mary because she is so holy. All the shrines of Mary in the world are places where the Catholic faith burns brightly and strongly. It's obvious in places like Lourdes and Fatima, but also in parts of Northern Europe where the faith is often lukewarm and has been watered down for decades. We see how true devotion to Mary always leads to greater devotion to Jesus. So yes, the messiah crushes the serpent's head, but so does his mother.

The Branch

St. Matthew in his account of the birth of Jesus quotes the OT five times and says four times says that the things that happened, happened to fulfil the scripture. Each one of these quotes is somewhat problematic, but the last one is probably the most problematic. At the end of his account of the birth of Jesus, after Herod is dead and it's safe to return home, St Matthew writes this:

There he went to dwell in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He will be called a Nazorean." (Mt. 2:23)

The problem is, you can scour the OT and you will not find this saying or anything like it anywhere, in fact the word Nazareth doesn't appear at all in the OT, it never appears in Hebrew. When I began teaching Matthew to undergraduates twenty two years ago I remember reading commentary after commentary and no one seemed to have a satisfactory explanation. The most common explanation is that it is related to the word Nazirite. The Nazirites were people like Samson and John the Baptist who were consecrated to God from birth, lived an ascetic life, drank no wine etc. Two problems with that. First Jesus doesn't behave like a nazirites, he drinks wine, he's called *a glutton and a drunkard*. (Mt. 11:19)

Secondly the name Nazareth has nothing to do with the word Nazirite. In the 1960's an inscription was found near Nazareth and in Hebrew and it clearly referred to that place, but in Hebrew it's written "Netsereh." We pronounce it "Nazareth" because that's how it's written in the NT in Greek, with a letter zeta, the equivalent of an English Z. But in Hebrew it's written with a letter Tsade, whose sound is "TS" that letter doesn't exist in Greek or in english so it was written with a Greek letter Zeta, which seemed to be the nearest thing. You know the other name for Jerusalem in Zion and that's sometimes written Sion because

again in Hebrew the first letter is a Tsade, so it's really Tsion Nazareth isn't mentioned anywhere in the OT, probably because it didn't exist until 150 years before Christ or if it did it was called something else. But the word is related to a very important prophesy in Isaiah which we hear in Advent and is very well known:

Isaiah 11:1 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The Hebrew word translated as 'Branch' is *Netser* נֶטֶר from which the village of Netsereth takes its name. It means something like Branch-town or Branchville or Branch-borough. The phrase *stump of Jesse* expresses in English what Isaiah is on about. Jesse was the father of David. David had founded a dynasty which God had promised would last for ever. God said to David:

Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever." (2Sam. 7:16)

Psalms 71, speaking about the king, the successors of David says:

5 He shall endure like the sun and the moon from age to age. 7 In his days justice shall flourish and peace till the moon fails. 8 He shall rule from sea to sea, from the Great River to earth's bounds.

Well, that was written in the 10th c, Isaiah is preaching in the 8th c. and it seems at that time as though God's promises had come to nothing. The kings who succeeded Solomon were mostly faithless scallywags, including Ahaz who is on the throne when Isaiah gives this prophesy. So this proud, noble tree of Jesse looked more like a tree stump, a broken down vestige of what it was meant to be. And 100 or so years after Isaiah Babylon would invade Jerusalem, the dynasty of David would come to a final and ignominious end and at least politically speaking there would never be a successor of David on the throne again. It's in the midst of this terrible disappointment that Isaiah makes his prophesy. There will be a new beginning, we will, someday have a just ruler, that stump of the house of Jesse will sprout a new branch. The people of Nazareth knew that their clan was descended from David. Both Matthew and Luke give us Jesus' family tree. Matthew's is through Joseph and Luke's is through Mary and it's clear that he's descended from David through both his earthly parents. He is truly a son of David. And he comes from a town called Branch, so it's the conviction of the writers of the NT that Jesus is that branch, he is that shoot of which Isaiah spoke. But there are other writers in the OT who call the messiah a branch. Take Jeremiah 23:5:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Or Jeremiah 33:15

at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Or Zechariah 3:8-9

8 Now listen, Joshua, high priest, (you and your colleagues who sit before you! For they are an omen of things to come) I am going to bring my servant the Branch..... and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day.

Or Zechariah 6:12:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Here is a man whose name is Branch: for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD. 13 It is he that shall build the temple of the LORD; he shall bear royal honour, and shall sit upon his throne and rule.

A strange detail appears in Ch. 10 of Mark Jesus comes into Jericho and passes by the blind man called Bartimaeus. We read:

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

How would Bartimaeus know that he was a descendent of David? Because he came from Nazareth, people from Nazareth are decedents of David. So St Matthew pulls all these strands together for us.

There he went to dwell in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He will be called a Nazorean." (Mt. 2:23)

But remember Matthew originally wrote is gospel in Hebrew and it would have read something like:

He went to dwell in a city called Branchtown, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He will be called Branch."

No less than three of the prophets, Isiah, Jeremiah and Zechariah refer to the messiah as Branch. So what looks like a fabrication on the part of Matthew, is in fact a very rich layered example of what we call intertextuality, how various texts from different parts of the Bible shed light on each other.

The Bronze Serpent John (3:14)

In his conversation with Nicodemus Jesus says something rather strange.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

It's strange because Jesus is talking in a fairly straightforward way about the effect that his crucifixion will have on believers, but he uses a rather odd and obscure incident from the Old Testament to shed light on it. We would expect something like: "Just as Moses led our ancestors from slavery to freedom, so my death will set you free." So let's take a closer look. And yes, we can see the connection between the serpent being lifted up and Jesus being lifted up, but on the face of it that's about all the connection there is, so isn't this rather tenuous, far-fetched?

Jesus refers to the incident in Numbers 21:4-9 when the people accuse Moses AND GOD of bringing them into the wilderness to die. Note their resentment is towards God, they accuse him of being a murderer, of wanting bad not good for them. They are plagued by poisonous serpents which bite and kill

many of them. So God instructs Moses to make a model serpent out of bronze and set it on a pole so that anyone who is bitten can look at this serpent and live. God is telling them that despite their blasphemies and doubts, he does have their good at heart. To drive the point home he takes the thing that they fear and despise the most, a snake, and makes that the source of their healing. He is saying something like: "You doubt my ability to look after you; not only can I look after you but I am so powerful and so creative that I can work my miracles through the thing that you find most horrible, the thing that you reject and loathe."

By being lifted up on the cross, Jesus too becomes something loathsome, something which the crowd, hates and rejects. The religious authorities knew exactly what they were doing getting Jesus crucified. It would have been much easier for them to have him bumped off in a back street in Jerusalem and his body dumped somewhere. But that wouldn't be enough. They wanted to publicly discredit him, to take away any possibility that people might still find some good in him, and at the same time by arranging what looked like a correct legal procedure, to convince themselves that what they had done was a righteous act.

The Romans used crucifixion as a deterrent and a very powerful one. It involved the most excruciating pain, which often lasted for days, so anyone who was tempted to rebel against Rome would think again. But there was always the possibility that by executing someone publicly as a political criminal they made a martyr or a hero out of him. The Romans knew, as modern oppressive regimes know, that political executions can often rebound on them, and stir up public feeling against them rather than quell it. But not in Israel. Deuteronomy 21:23 says that anyone who is hanged upon a tree is cursed by God. By getting Jesus hung on the cross, the authorities saw to it that everyone would consider him cursed, that no one could possibly consider him a hero or a martyr. Rather they would see him as a fraud, one who had misled people and had now got his just deserts. (This of course makes it all the more remarkable that fifty three days later the Apostles are standing up in Jerusalem proclaiming him not just a good man but Lord and Christ, God's anointed one. They could not possibly have invented this wild claim about someone who had been so thoroughly discredited. The only explanation for their outrageous preaching at Pentecost is the one the New Testament gives, that Jesus was risen and they had met him.)

Jesus is saying to Nicodemus that just as people treated God in the wilderness as someone wicked, so people will do the same to him. But precisely by being lifted up – crucified – Jesus will become a source of healing and salvation to people indeed a source of eternal life. So the outrageous way in which God behaves at the crucifixion has a clear and a close precedent in the history of Israel. Surely the last place people who are daily threatened by snake bite would look for healing from it is the image of a snake. The last place on earth anyone would expect to find God present and active is in a man suffering a hideous death in a way that seemed to confirm that God's curse was upon him. But that is precisely Jesus' claim. Human being could never invent something so strange. So,

as St. Paul tells us, the cross is either complete and utter folly, or the power and the wisdom of God.

The Sacrifice among the nations.

There is one more passage I'd like to look at which although it's not directly a prophesy about the person of Jesus, has been fulfilled in the most amazing way which is visible to everybody on earth and could not have been fulfilled without Jesus and what he left us. In the last book of the OT, the prophet Malachi we read:

For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts.
(Mal. 1:11)

Now when that was written in about that simply was not true. We cannot be sure of the date of this book but the best guess is probably around about 420 BC. The New Temple is up and running and his concerns are similar to those of Ezra and Nehemiah who also write around that time. The book begins with God berating the people and priests of Jerusalem for being so lukewarm in their worship of him; they offer blind and sick animals in sacrifice. And at the time of writing, the Lord's name was not great among the nations, it was largely unknown. And although in most modern translations this is translated in the present tense this is not the only possibility. So for instance the King James has:

My name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen,

The New International Version also puts it in the future. This is perfectly possible linguistically because to be precise Malachi doesn't use the verb to be at all. The Hebrew says literally:

For from the rising of the Sun to its setting great my name in the Gentiles
~yIëAGB; 'ymiv. lAdÜG" Aa^aAbm.-d[;w> vm,v,ø-xr;z>Mimi yK

Malachi is looking forward to something that is simply not possible at the time he is writing, and will never be possible within the confines of second Temple Judaism. All sacrifices had to be offered in Jerusalem, nowhere else. True, most pagan religions offered sacrifices but they were regarded by the Jews as idolatrous abominations. From earliest times the universal opinion of the Church Fathers is that this prophesy is fulfilled in the Mass. At the time of Malachi, making converts wasn't a priority for the Jews; they had no great missionary ambitions. But there are various texts throughout the OT that make it clear that what Israel had was intended for everyone. And so we read in Genesis 12, which is really the beginning of the story of Salvation, God calls Abram, tells him to go to a place which he will show him, so the very beginnings of the formation of the people who would later call themselves the Jews and then says to him:

I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:3)

So it's clear from the very beginning of revelation that God intended everyone to have the blessings which were given to Israel his chosen people. But how? Through Christ and his Catholic Church, through the one Church which encompasses all the families of the earth. I once heard a Rabbi say that he will always be grateful to the Christians for having spread the insights of the Hebrew Bible throughout the whole world in a way that Judaism was never able to do and never really tried to do. The very last thing Jesus said to the disciples was:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. (Mt. 28:19-20)

Because of the spread of Catholicism throughout the world, which meant that the sacrifice of the Mass was offered everywhere, Malachi's prophesy came true. If you remember in ch. 6 of John Jesus introduces the idea of the Eucharist. He says:

For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world."

And the people say:

Lord, give us this bread always.

Think about this, as we speak, Mass is being celebrated somewhere on earth. It's been calculated that the consecration of the Mass happens every four to six seconds, somewhere on earth. As we speak, somewhere the host and the chalice are raised. And as we speak, someone, many people are receiving Holy Communion, at this very moment.

Lord, give us this bread always.

Jesus has fulfilled that request literally and superabundantly in the Eucharist. And in Eucharistic prayer 3 we hear:

And you never cease to gather a people to yourself, so that from the rising of the sun to its setting a pure sacrifice may be offered to your name.

The Church is saying here that the prophesy of Malachi has been fulfilled in the Eucharist. And so many of the early writers whom we call the Fathers were of the same opinion. To name just a few: The author of the Didache, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome who was the fourth Pope, The author of the Epistle to Diognetus, Irenaeus of Lyons, Eusebius, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem, Cyril of Alexandria and St. Augustine. They all said that this prophesy has been fulfilled in the Mass.

So having said all that, maybe my taking scripture out of context is, at least on this occasion, quite apposite. Jesus is speaking about marriage. When we see a happily married couple (or indeed a happily engaged couple) we say: "They are made for each other." Isn't that one of the basic truths of the OT and the NT? They were made for each other, quite literally by God.

What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.