

Joseph's Child

This morning we have heard the story of the nativity from Matthew's gospel. You've almost certainly heard it before, although you're probably slightly more familiar with the narrative from Luke. Matthew's is a little more matter-of-fact, a little more gritty in the detail, a little more practical. There's no spontaneous song of praise from Mary. No account of Mary's meeting with Elizabeth and the unborn John the Baptist leaping in the presence of Mary.

In fact, Matthew's account can be regarded as Joseph's story while it is Mary's story that is given in Luke's gospel. The stories are not in conflict; not incompatible – they contain common elements, but they each focus on different details.

It's fair to say that we don't know a lot about Joseph. Beyond the nativity stories, and the flight to Egypt, he only appears in the account of Jesus staying at the temple in at the end of Luke's second chapter.

We know Joseph was a carpenter, and, as we heard in this morning's reading, was faithful to the law, and of the house of David. But he is someone who often blends into the background of the christmas story, who might get to lead the donkey Mary rides into Bethlehem on,

and someone who is often confused with the shepherds in nativity plays.

Joseph is important, though: He is important in the nativity story, and he is an important role model for us. Matthew tells us that Joseph was faithful to the law – often translated as ‘a righteous man’. He knew and loved God.

“This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about” says Matthew, beginning the story. There’s no question here, not for Matthew anyway; He’s setting out the facts as he knows them – that Jesus is the messiah and this is how his birth occurred.

“[Jesus] mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.” Mary was pregnant, but Matthew tells us that Joseph was not the biological father – though he would be, of course, legally the father of Jesus, and it was through Joseph as we can see from later in this reading - that Jesus is, according to the Jewish law, legally a descendant of King David, or as Paul reminds us in Romans 1:3 that Jesus “was descended from David according to the flesh”.

Matthew tells us that Mary was a virgin, and tells us that she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was conceived of the flesh, and born of the virgin, but also of the Holy Spirit.

From what Matthew writes, Jesus is human and he is divine.

But then we read that “Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”

On the face of it, that can make us feel uneasy. Joseph is, a good man, but he plans to ditch Mary? How can that be?

To our 21st century ears, that just doesn't sound right.

But the weight of scholarly opinion, as well as the testament of Matthew that Joseph was a ‘faithful to the law’, is that, yes, in first century Judea, under the Jewish law, divorcing her quietly would have been the ‘right’ thing to do, both according to the law, and to the benefit of the young woman involved. Strange as it may seem to us today.

But then “...an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.””

Imagine that: Joseph's engagement plans first shattered by the pregnancy of Mary, then the careful and correct plan to deal with the situation and then this.

No, Joseph! Marry her anyway, because the child is conceived by the Holy Spirit – and not only that: “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

“...he will save his people from their sins” – which is really skipping ahead to the end of the gospel. He will. And he does. But a lot happens between Bethlehem and Calvary.

Matthew tells us (1:22-23): “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

So we can see that Jesus' birth did not happen as some random event, but as part of God's plan for the world.

The prophecy that Matthew shares, was from Isaiah and was made around seven hundred years before the events Matthew talks about.

Jesus was not physically the son of Joseph, nor any other human father - he was not the son of a man, but he was,

as he would later describe himself, the Son of Man. He was human.

Although Mary's virginity has been held as something to be very important, over the years, something even to be worshipped, it is what Mary's virginity shows us that is important - not for what it tells us about Mary, but for what it tells us about Jesus. Not for how it makes Mary special, but for how it makes Jesus special.

Of course, this is not our only evidence of Jesus' divinity: Jesus was confirmed as and declared to be the Son of God time and time again throughout the new testament, from when he stayed too long at the temple as a child ("Did you know I had to be in my father's house") through the voice speaking from heaven at his baptism, through walking on water, from curing disease and casting out demons to the transfiguration, and ultimately, as we read in Romans 1:4, he "was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead".

Who else, but the Son of God could conquer death?

A favourite bible verse for Christmas is John 3:16
"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life"

But it's not just a verse for Christmas. God did give us his son when he was born to Mary in Bethlehem. But God also gave up us his son for us when Jesus died at Calvary. And God also gave us his son when he raised him to new life.

And the gift of Jesus is offered to everyone. We are all called to belong to Jesus. And make no mistake, we are all called. All we need to do is make a faithful response to Jesus.

Just like the faithful response that Joseph showed when he didn't quietly divorce Mary, when he didn't do what was best according to the law and custom, when he didn't take the easy way out.

The faithful response shown by Joseph, needs to be our response too.

Especially, I think, at Christmas time it is easy to get distracted from the good news of Jesus, and our faithful response to that news.

There is the image of Jesus the Christ child: lying in swaddling cloths in a manger in a stable in Bethlehem. There will be people who prefer to embrace only this image of Jesus: A helpless babe, a loving mother, the warm glow of a stable, the ox and the lamb standing by. (Maybe with Joseph blending into the background). The perfect gift of God to his world that might well be lost

amidst a warm idea of “The spirit of Christmas”, the “Real Meaning of Christmas” or whatever.

And there will be others that reject that as the correct image of Jesus to portray at Christmas. Too warm and fuzzy for the real Jesus, the big picture Jesus who died on the cross, as the sacrifice for sin.

I think these images are both correct, but both, on their own fall short. Jesus did come as a helpless child, and Jesus did die for all of us. But without the perfect gift of God, without that helpless baby lying in a manger in a stable in Bethlehem there could have been no perfect sacrifice – and I think it is right that we focus on Jesus the Christ Child, the perfect gift for the world, at Christmas time.

Though not just the helpless Christ Child lying in a manger in Bethlehem, but also the Christ Child who was prophesied, the Christ Child who was conceived of Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, the Christ Child who is the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy, the Christ Child who is the Messiah, who is the saviour – who is our saviour.

We should embrace Jesus, the Christ Child - as we sing every year, and will be singing in our first hymn on Christmas morning this year: Yea, Lord we greet thee, born on Christmas morning.

But we also need to look beyond the Christ Child, beyond the baby Jesus to Jesus the teacher, Jesus the healer, Jesus the friend of the outcast and foreigner, Jesus the calmer of storms, Jesus the friend, Jesus the conqueror of death, Jesus the bringer of the Kingdom of God, Jesus the saviour!

So, in this last week of advent, as Christmas approaches, in amongst all the hustle and bustle of the world and our lives, let us focus on the Christ Child.
The perfect gift of God.

Because without the perfect gift of God, there could have been no perfect sacrifice.

Christmas is a great time to remember God's perfect gift for us – or come to appreciate it for the first time if you don't know it already.

As we enjoy gifts this Christmas, whether it is enjoying gifts that we receive or the enjoyment that comes from giving gifts to others, let us not simply not forget about, but accept and enjoy, in faithful obedience, the perfect gift God has given us in His son.

Amen