

Scripture Reading Sunday December 22nd 2019

Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV)

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹Because 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. ²⁰But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

²³"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"

(which means "God with us").²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Sermon: Joseph's Crisis of Conscience

Only the Gospels of Matthew and Luke give us birth narratives for Jesus. Put simply, Luke presents us with a perspective based on Mary and Matthew gives us a viewpoint from Joseph. What we tend to do, especially at Christmas time, is to merge the two stories together. However, there is *no* evidence that Matthew and Luke knew of each other's accounts when they wrote them.¹ The two stories don't fit together perfectly because they were written for different audiences and with different purposes in mind. I think it's best to keep their narratives separate and take each one on its own merits, and to see how they enhance their gospels as a whole. So today, I am focusing only on parts of Matthew's account.

Many years ago, I was interested in tracing my family tree. This was before *ancestry.com* and the power of the internet. It was all done laboriously by hand in the national records office and – needless to say – I soon got tired of it! Matthew's gospel begins with a genealogy of Jesus.² Matthew traces Jesus' lineage back through David to Abraham, thus emphasizing to his Jewish readers that the birth of Jesus is part of the *ongoing* story of Israel. Matthew begins his Gospel by boldly stating that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David,³ but ends his genealogy in a rather peculiar way: instead of his usual '*this person was the father of that person*,' he states, "Joseph was the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah."⁴ Everyone who read his account would have realized this oddity and so our New Testament reading this morning is Matthew's way of trying to explain or clarify what he meant.

Matthew tells us that Mary was *engaged* to Joseph.⁵ Marriages in those days were arranged by the parents and this promise of marriage was *legally* as binding as being married. That's why Matthew uses the words "husband," "wife," and "divorce" in describing the nature of their relationship. The bride-to-be still lived in her father's house until the formal wedding ceremony. However, before Mary married Joseph and moved into his home, she "was found to be pregnant" and Matthew explains *to his readers* that this was "a work of the Holy Spirit."⁶ Joseph hears about this pregnancy and *knows* he's *not* the father and so has a crisis of conscience.⁷ He *wants* to do the right thing but *what* should he do? We're told that Joseph was a "righteous man," in other words he faithfully kept the mosaic law, and so knew precisely what he *must* do: he had no choice, he must divorce her. Joseph didn't have the option to

¹ They both, however, have intimate knowledge of Mark's Gospel and that is evident throughout their respective Gospels.

² Matt 1:1-17. The word translated "genealogy" means "origin" (1:1) and its Greek root ("genesis") is repeated in 1:18.

³ Matt 1:1. His stress is on *both* titles, since he repeats *twice* more "Messiah" (in 1:17,18) and also "son of David" (in 1:21).

⁴ Matt 1:16.

⁵ Matt 1:18. I suspect that there were some rumours circulating concerning the birth of Jesus which were not very flattering towards Mary, suggesting sexual impropriety. Some scholars treat John 8:41 as a veiled reference to Christ's (questionable) birth. Both Matthew and Luke's birth stories could therefore be seen as setting the record straight. Many have noticed Matthew's mention of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba in Matthew's genealogy. (Why are they there when Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah are not?) What is key is that they are *all* non-Jews and therefore not only does this remind his readers of their faith and tenacity, but perhaps is a hint that God's history of salvation will finally embrace non-Jews (see Matt 2:1-12). Some have suggested that they are mentioned in the context of various kinds of sexual misconduct and hence acts as a backdrop to the story of Jesus' mother, Mary, who was suspected of having had a scandalous sexual relationship.

⁶ Matt 1:18.

⁷ Joseph's *not* knowing who was the child's father is *central* to Matthew's narrative.

forgive and forget because that in itself would violate the mosaic law! No matter how much he loved Mary, it was his religious obligation to annul the marriage contract because she was apparently guilty of having sex before marriage. In earlier times, this was a crime punishable by death!⁸ By the first century there were other ways to annul the marriage but this, of necessity, would still be public and therefore bring profound shame to teenage Mary.⁹ This, Matthew tells us, Joseph did *not* want to do; he wished he could divorce Mary quietly, with no formal investigation into Mary's behaviour.¹⁰ Balancing "justice and mercy" was, then, part of Joseph's crisis of conscience.

We are told God's messenger appeared to him in a dream. This would make all Jewish readers remember the dreams of Joseph in the Old Testament - you know, the one with the technicolor dream-coat! The angel said: "Joseph, son of David, *don't* be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived within her is from the Holy Spirit."¹¹ We quickly learn three things here: First, it is Joseph, *not* Mary, who is descended from David and so there is an issue of how the future child will be considered as part of David's lineage, given Joseph is not the Father. Second, Mary is still living in her parent's home at this time. And third, Joseph is now informed of what Matthew told his readers earlier, namely, the child's conception is "from the Holy Spirit." What that means I'll discuss in a moment. The angel then says: "Mary will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."¹² This message, then, contains some kind of *explanation* for Mary's pregnancy which, bizarre as it seems, was meant to reassure Joseph. And second, it gives two *instructions*: (a) go ahead with the marriage and (b) name the son, "Jesus." Matthew later tells us that Joseph did just that!¹³

Matthew inserts his own commentary into events, one that was no doubt intended as an added explanation of the angel's message. He writes, "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.'"¹⁴ This verse has generated a life of its own within Church History, one Matthew likely didn't intend, and so we come to the Christian doctrine of "virgin birth," one that we recite in our traditional creeds.¹⁵ Let's explore this aspect briefly.

The trouble with this is verse is that we fix *our* attention on the word "virgin" and get side-tracked into sexual status and biology, whereas Matthew wants us to see *God's* action *in* history and the *identity* of Jesus. First, there is *no* evidence that 1st century Jews had an expectation the Messiah's birth *must* arise

⁸ Deut 22:23–24. It is *not* Joseph's prerogative to forgive Mary and so, acting out of forgiveness, continue with the marriage.

⁹ Culturally, it is generally considered Mary was most likely a very young teenager at this time.

¹⁰ Matt 1:19. (This is what "quietly" meant.)

¹¹ Matt 1:20b. Incidentally, in Matt 2:1 we are in Bethlehem where, presumably, Joseph had a house – not unreasonable for someone descended from David. Matthew has no journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, as in Luke 2:4!

¹² Matt 1:21.

¹³ Matt 1:24–25. And Matthew adds that Joseph did not have sex with Mary until after Jesus was born.

¹⁴ Matt 1:22–23, he cites (and adapts) Isa 7:14. This is the *only* citation of Isa 7:14 in the New Testament.

¹⁵ There is absolutely no biblical evidence for the perpetual virginity of Mary! She had more children, Matt 13:55–56. Note too that "virgin birth" is a misnomer; "virgin conception" is meant.

from a miraculous conception. Matthew's account would be, therefore, a surprise to Jews too!¹⁶ Yes, Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 from the popular Greek translation of the Old Testament, which has the word "virgin," but the earlier Hebrew original uses the word "young woman" and so there is some textual ambiguity here. The context of *that* prophecy, which I spoke about a couple of weeks ago, is of God giving a *sign* confirming he was proactive in Isaiah's situation.¹⁷ Moreover, miraculous birth stories are typically a sign that God is powerfully at work; consider the births of John the Baptist to Elizabeth, Samuel to Hannah, and Isaac to Sarah.¹⁸ To speak of "the conception of Jesus as a work of the Holy Spirit" is to say that this an *inexplicable, creative* act of the divine *spirit* – and that distinction from God the Father is important. So, a miraculous conception is *not* concerned with *nature* as such, but identifies those persons as having a *special* role in God's historical drama of saving his people.¹⁹

Second, we must also be careful *not* to say that the virgin conception is *central* to the Christian claim that Jesus is *divine*. Think about it for a moment. Are Christians claiming that Mary was somehow impregnated supernaturally by God and consequently her child was both human and divine?²⁰ This is problematic because to have one divine parent and one human parent is *not* what Christians mean by "incarnation." Jesus would be a hybrid, a demigod, half-human and half-divine²¹ - *not fully human and fully divine*. No, our belief in the divinity of Jesus the Messiah is based on *faith* and not in some strange biological explanation! Moreover, Mark, John, and Paul make absolutely *no* reference to a virgin conception and they would have, if they had thought this was important in establishing Christ's identity!²² And Matthew, having mentioned it, doesn't base any subsequent theology on this miracle.²³

Instead of focusing on Mary, Matthew's attention is on *who* this baby is and *what* he will do. Jesus is the "Messiah"²⁴ and, as the angel said, "This child is different for he will *save his people* from their sins."²⁵ And the rest of Matthew's Gospel unpacks how that will come about. The name "Jesus" has the same root as "Joshua" and was a popular boy's name at the time. Joshua was, of course, the successor to Moses²⁶ and an important theme of Matthew is Jesus fulfilling a Moses-like role in salvation history.²⁷

¹⁶ It therefore looks as though Matthew found the verse (Isa 7:14) *because* he knew of the Mary's unusual story!

¹⁷ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/The-Stump-of-Jesse.pdf> .

¹⁸ See Luke 1; 1 Sam 1, and Gen 21:1-6. Elizabeth was childless and was (now) considered too old to conceive (Luke 1:7). In the case of Sarah, the language of "conception is of the Holy Spirit" seems to be echoed in Jub 16:12.

¹⁹ Consider too Moses' birth story, Exod 2:1-10. In Jesus' day there were also stories that Moses' birth was supernatural. Even so, Isaac, Moses and Samuel are *not* seen as a divine, rather they had a *special* role in God's plan for salvation history.

²⁰ See also the very peculiar mention of angels (or non-human beings) having sex with human women in Gen 6:2.

²¹ I think both Matthew and Luke would have been annoyed to discover that Mary's conception through the agency of the Holy Spirit would place her son in the same category as some of the Greek legends of demigods! Yet they must have been aware of the literary risks they were taking in presenting their birth narratives in this way. This is a *Jewish* story!

²² See John 1:1-18 (whose Gospel is widely regarded as having the highest Christology) and Rom 1:1-7, where Paul stresses the resurrection (v4) - rather than the birth (v3) - of Jesus.

²³ Some scholars have also suggested Mary represents "virgin Israel" – see Amos 5:2; 2 Kings 19:21; Isa 37:22; Jer 14:17; 18:13; 31:4, 21; and Lam 1:15; 2:13 – who, by God's help, would bring forth the Messiah.

²⁴ Matt 1: 1, 17, 18. The triple emphasis in the opening chapter leaves no ambiguity for Matthew or his readers.

²⁵ Matt 1:21b.

²⁶ Num 27:12–23; Deut 31:7–23; Josh 1:5–9. Joshua has the authority of Moses, as does Jesus (for Matthew).

²⁷ The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) mirrors Moses on Mt. Sinai as giving (or reinterpreting) the law for/to the people.

Moreover, Matthew, by citing Isaiah, identifies Jesus with Immanuel, “God with us.”²⁸ All this is a *sign* to Matthew’s readers as to *who* Jesus is and *what* he will do!

Now how what about that genealogical problem I mentioned earlier concerning Jesus being a “son of David”? In obedience to the angel, Joseph *names* the child “Jesus.” The action of a man naming the child *legally* makes the child his own.²⁹ Joseph in naming Jesus results in him having all the legal rights of sonship, including inheritance *and* lineage. Jesus is therefore an authentic descendent of David. Taken all together it is a fascinating birth story and Matthew (and Luke, for that matter) includes his birth narratives because he felt an explanation was needed. Not only does this point to the *identity* of Jesus, it tells us the kind of man Joseph was and, as I conclude, I want to briefly consider that aspect.

We don’t know much about Joseph; by the time Jesus was an adult, Joseph is not mentioned and so we presume he had died. But we do know that he was a man of religious integrity and who must have deeply loved Mary. Like in all wedding preparations, you want your plans for the celebration to be fully realised - just like our arrangements for Christmas. But life contains the unexpected and the unwelcome. In the story of Joseph and Mary, things don’t turn out as Joseph anticipated, as he hears that his wife-to-be is *already* pregnant. Having to get his marriage annulled was not something he foresaw, but that is what he reluctantly knows he must do. Yet Joseph courageously violated religious and social convention, and remained faithful to Mary, because God intervened in a surprising way through a dream. The angel said, in effect, “I know this is not what you expected Joseph, but it’s going to be okay. God is about to do something wonderful here, despite all evidence to the contrary.” Joseph had two options, either to trust this strange news that nobody else would believe, or do the safe, expected thing and divorce Mary. Not only a crisis of conscience, but a crazy choice! What would you or I do in that situation? Joseph certainly took “the road less travelled by and that made all the difference.”³⁰ But what a brave decision! We should reflect on the choices we make and how they may sometimes be at odds with conventional wisdom. We will, perhaps, only know the difference they make with hindsight.³¹ Because Joseph fades quickly from the scene, he can become a forgotten hero. It is good to pause and thank God for the unsung “Josephs” of life.

But I want to end on that implied divine message to Joseph. Who here today have tough choices to make, or perhaps are having a crisis of conscience? Those whose plans for their life seem to be in tatters? May be God’s word for you today is this: “*I know this is not what you expected, but it’s going to be okay. I am about to do something wonderful here, despite all evidence to the contrary.*” And then remember the promise and sign of Immanuel. God is not distant or remote,³² “God is with us,” and so be at peace and be thankful. Amen. Let us pray.

²⁸ “God with us” does not *have* to be seen as a “high” Christology. His name is simply a *sign* (Isa 7:14); Jews did not think the Messiah was a *divine* figure. However, at the end of Matthew’s Gospel we *do* have a “high” Christology, see Matt 28:17–20.

²⁹ More generally in Jewish culture, the child’s mother was *not* in doubt, only his paternity. For the *father* to name him is therefore significant in terms of ‘owning’ the child.

³⁰ See Robert Frost’s poem: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken>

³¹ In some situations, we may not live long enough to have that hindsight and so recognise the difference the decision made.

³² At this point in Jewish history, God had been thought to be “absent” (or silent) for several hundred years.