

LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE GOSPEL

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FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

21st December 2025

Matt. 1:18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.

Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus differs in several ways from the version of St. Luke which places a great stress on the role of Mary and her 'yes' to God. For Matthew the emphasis will be on Jesus as the one who fulfils the scriptures of the Jewish people. This is important for him because his gospel was written for Jews who had become followers of Jesus but who were coming under pressure to abandon their faith.

One of the ways Matthew will try to persuade them is to show how Jesus is indeed the one spoken about in the prophecies. He will also use Old Testament figures and images to connect the story of Jesus with the story of the people of Israel. Hence the importance to Joseph who is like Joseph of the book of Genesis who was also guided by dreams and was faithful to God.

The unique circumstances of the birth of Jesus are shown through the prophecy from Isaiah. In the person of Jesus, God is truly with us and, as Matthew says at the end of his gospel, will stay with us until the end of time.

SEAN GOAN - Let the Reader Understand, Year A

- (i) Communication in a dream: the clear prototypes are Jacob (and his famous ladder) and Joseph (with the coat of many colours). Otherwise, the Bible is hesitant, not to say suspicious, of divination by dreams.
- (ii) Divorce was allowed by inference in Deut 24:1-4, although no legislation formally permits it. The rabbis discussed "warmly" the conditions under which a man might divorce his wife.
- (iii) Son of David: the relationship with David immediately calls to mind the guarantee and promise to the house of David made by the prophet Nathan in 2 Sam 7 and the prayer version of it in Psalm 89. David was the anointed shepherd king of Israel — language significant in Matthew. In the centuries before Jesus' birth, people's hopes focused on a restoration of the kingdom of David, as a mark of God's continued faithfulness to his people.
- (iv) Jesus is the Greek for Joshua, the name of Moses' successor, who actually led the people into the promised land. The name comes Hebrew/Aramaic and means "YHWH is salvation" or "YHWH saves/has saved." Messiah or Christ is not found in the Hebrew Bible pointing to an expected end-time agent of God's salvation. That language and expectation developed in the last two centuries before the birth of Jesus.

Thought for the day

In a culture where God is, apparently, absent, it may sound strange to hear words such as "Do not be afraid" and "God is with us." Such assurances are at the heart of our biblical faith from start to finish. Everyone who is anyone in the Bible is told not to be afraid. And the assurance "I will be with you" is found throughout starting with the very name of God in Ex 3:14, I am who I am. The God—in whom we live and move and have our being—is there all along,

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

As we move into prayer on the passage, we move from consideration of the mystery of how 'God with us' was revealed to the world in the person of Jesus 2000 years ago, to a reflection on how we become aware of 'God with us' now in our daily lives.

1. It took some time for Joseph to accept the fact that, in Mary, there truly was Emmanuel - God with us. God is with us now, but at times we struggle to perceive God's presence. Where have you unexpectedly discovered the presence of 'God with you'? Recall those experiences and give thanks.
2. Joseph was confused and uncertain about what he should do. It took time, and outside help, for him to discern what his next step should be. Perhaps you have also had difficulties along the way to some decisions or commitments. Recall that journey and the moments when it became clear to you what was being asked of you. Give thanks for the angels who helped you along the way.
3. Mary bore Jesus within her, unseen to all, and unacknowledged by most. In Joseph she found one who believed in the treasure that she bore. We can be bearers of Jesus to others, and they to us. When have you been that kind of a bearer of Jesus to another? Who has been that to you?

JOHN BYRNE OSA - Intercom

You can read this as a story of Joseph. You might like to stay with the long and painful journey which his vocation involves, identifying with Joseph's fears, his hesitations and eventually his total commitment.

It is also the story of Mary; although she does not say a word right through. She is the symbol of those who bear God within them and must wait until their collaborators welcome them and so allow God's work to be born. Do not, however, invent your own story of how Mary felt or what went through her mind; take the text exactly as you find it and you will find ample material to help you understand the work of God.

Scripture Prayers

"We do not have to put God into the world. He is there. But we must preserve his presence and aid our brothers and sisters to find him." A worker priest

Lord, as Christians we act as if we are doing the world a favour by our service.

But the world is like Mary bearing divinity in her womb, and you want us, like Joseph, to welcome her with reverence because of this presence within her.

We must proclaim to all that within the world we can find Emmanuel, a name which means God-is-with-us.

Lord, we think today of women who are pregnant and are not being accepted.

Send your angel to those families,

telling them that they must not be afraid to welcome this pregnancy because it is your gift to them.

MICHEL DE VERTEUIL - Lectio Divina on the Sunday Gospels, Year A

A person was not given a name arbitrarily among the Hebrews, because the *name*, as in almost all ancient cultures, represents a person's being, his true identity, what is expected of him.

So the evangelist Matthew is very keen from the beginning to explain to his readers the profound meaning of the name of the person of whom he is going to speak throughout his Gospel. The name of that child not yet born is *Jesus*, which means *God saves*. He is so named because *"he will save his people from their sins."*

Humanity needs to be saved from evil, injustice and violence; it needs to be pardoned and to be reoriented toward a more dignified life for human beings. This is the salvation offered to us in Jesus.

Matthew also signs him a new name: *Emmanuel*. He knows that Jesus has not been named thus historically. The name is shocking, absolutely new, and means "God with us", a name that only we who believe in Jesus attribute to him as due to him. God is with us, blesses us and saves us.

With his name on our lips and in our hearts we can live and die with hope.

Joseph is sometimes depicted in statue form as 'Sleeping Joseph'. He shows us how God reveals God's plan to us in times of silence and rest. Even when we are doing the right things and living a virtuous life, God can surprise us, picking apart the lines we draw between people. We are constantly being nudged out of our comfort zone, towards others, to become ever more compassionate, loving and open to God's dream for us.

Only in the sacredness of inward silence does the soul truly meet the secret, hiding God. The strength of resolve, which afterward shapes life, and mixes itself with action, is the fruit of the sacred, solitary moments. There is a divine depth in silence. We meet God alone. (FW Robertson)

TRÍONA DOHERTY & JANE MELLETT—Go Deeper