

## Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25)

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*10:00am Holy Communion – 21<sup>st</sup> December 2025*

<sup>18</sup> This 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. <sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> But 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. <sup>21</sup> 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.”

<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

<prayer>

Many of us know the nativity story well, but I recently heard about this dramatic exchange between Joseph and the Innkeeper:

Joseph: My wife is in labour, we need a bed for the night.

Innkeeper: I have no room.

Joseph: No you don't understand, the baby is coming. We need a room now!

Innkeeper: I'm sorry, we are full. There is no room.

Joseph: I'm serious, we have a situation here. I need that room!

Innkeeper: As I said, there is nothing here for you. No room – right!

Joseph: But we need a room. The baby is on its way.

Innkeeper: Look, it's not my fault your wife is pregnant!

Joseph: No and it's not mine either!

Poor Joseph the husband of Mary is usually portrayed as the spare part of the nativity story, he is never quite the main event. He is, however, the only person in the nativity story to get *two* visits from the angels: once to deal with his pre-marital worries (as we shall see), and a second time to be warned of the wrath of King Herod (the slaughter of the innocents). If you were tuned in to my sermon last week, I explained how seven times God intervenes to ensure the nativity happened in the way it did. Without faithful Joseph, and his trustful obedience in God, **I wouldn't have happened any other way.**

There are three important points to make:

1. First, that Joseph is not the father of Jesus.
2. Secondly, that God's promises (through the prophets) were coming true (more about that shortly).
3. Thirdly, that Jesus was *adopted* by Joseph.

You may know that Matthew's gospel was very likely written to a Jewish audience, and this is why he is careful to ensure that Jewish morals and customs are observed. **The big problem is that nothing of the nativity seems to respect any such thing.**

But first let's remind ourselves of the backdrop.

‘This 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.’

The announcement that Mary is to be the mother of Jesus, and how that plays out in social and religious terms, is fraught with many difficulties *where Joseph is concerned*. Matthew is trying to balance several implications that could otherwise have caused great scandal to his readers, and therefore their rejection of the gospel and Jesus has the Messiah:

The first of these is the social implications. It would be unacceptable for a child to be born out of wedlock, let alone the Son of God! Secondly, there are messianic prophecies which required Mary to be a virgin, which in reality is a problem because a married virgin is unlikely. Therefore, Mary has to conceive while she is still pledged, betrothed or engaged to Joseph for a year before the marriage proper (which was the custom). Joseph would have respected her virginity throughout that year, and so it has to be that Mary fell pregnant *before* she is married, as a virgin, in order to fulfill the prophecies. Complicated!

And of course, Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem (Royal David City) as a descendant in the line of King David. Again, the prophecies required that too. Joseph fits the bill because he is of King David’s line, even though he was an ordinary man. Luke’s gospel tells us that a Roman census had been called, requiring all men to register at their ancestral home. For Joseph that was Bethlehem – The City of David.

**So, Mary had to be a pregnant with the Son of God, as virgin engaged to an ordinary man descended from Israel’s greatest king, and for all that to happen in a place they didn’t live anyway.** It could never be said that God is hemmed in by our notions of what should work.

**Joseph could never have imagined any of this, but it all seems to have become his problem.** The first irregularity he came across was that his betrothed was pregnant, and he knew for himself that he had no responsibility in the matter. Most biblical commentators claim that Joseph had the right to call off the engagement in what amounted to a form of legal divorce.

Fair enough, and that was probably the case, but let us not forget the emotional effect on him. Joseph would have loved Mary; he would have been looking forward to their marriage. I think he would have been working towards their wedding day with keen anticipation. Joseph is described by the gospels as a *faithful* man, **and he is always recorded as having done the right thing.** Whilst Joseph had the right to break-off with Mary, it would have been a very painful decision, reached after much consultation and careful thinking. But the fact remained that under the law it was an unacceptable situation and steeped in shame for both of them.

The impression that we get from Matthew is that God was watching this whole scene play-out in front of him, as if it were a drama. His reaction to Joseph's decision is to send an angel, possibly Gabriel again, to keep the show on the road. So in his dream the angel tells Joseph **"do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."** Fear is understandable, considering how it would have been accepted by others.

We should not imagine that this visitation from the angel made everything better for Joseph though – if anything it made matters even more difficult. Divorce would have made life much easier for him, but now he had been told by God that he should not do that! **He heard the voice of command from God, but no one else had, and so he would now have much more explaining to do.**

....and how do you suppose he would go about explaining it? I wonder if he would have told people that he *was* responsible for the pregnancy? That would have made things a lot easier. Joseph would still have been severely criticised for not having had the patience to wait until he was married to Mary, but at least it would all settle down and everything would have been legitimized once they had been wed. That seems a tidy explanation because it has the advantage that Joseph would then have had the right to name the child, which he had been instructed to do in the dream.

“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.”

**So Joseph’s faithfulness here is seen in his obedience to God’s plan, despite himself and everyone else.** Matthew is quick to point this out:

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<sup>23</sup> “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

**Joseph is a link in the chain of God’s plan – but he is never the main event.** We know he does what is right in the end and for years afterwards he continues as a faithful husband to Mary and faithful to God. He works to support the Holy Family and later Jesus’ brothers and sisters too. Later he drops out the story all together, perhaps because he died, but more likely because he had faithfully completed the task set to him.

The entire story of Jesus life will go onwards play out as the fulfilment of God's plan, but in a way which breaks open the expectations we have set for ourselves. **Like Mary, Josphe has to be faithful, but without all of the certainties we expect to have.** Faith is like that – uncomfortable at many points. I know how that feels, perhaps you do too. We fret, laying awake at night because we see worrying events unfolding, yet we are not in control.

God's ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts higher than our thoughts. Yet we cannot help but *predict and review* according to some comparison of our own construction. Jesus will go on to live his life and ministry in an unconventional in a way, which aligns well to the Christian faith in the UK today. In these majority secular times we Christians are regarded as different, even unconventional. But that is as it should be, because we are demonstrating a faithfulness that is based not on control or power. Maybe we should be more unconventional, where God's will is served before the expectation of the crowd.

Josphe teaches us a character and faithfulness that find their trust in God. He does well, but I know like us he would have found it often very difficult.

Amen