

Sunday 22 December 2019 Advent 4

Matthew 1. 18-end: When Mary tells Joseph

The main character in today's Gospel is not Jesus, but His earthly father, Joseph. Look at this story carefully.

About two thousand years ago in the little country of Israel, which was then under the control of Rome, a young woman fell in love with a man who was a carpenter by trade. They lived in the little Galilean town of Nazareth. Both of them were very devout in their faith.

But this is where the beautiful and romantic story ends and the drama begins.

Imagine the horrific dilemma of Joseph. He discovers that the woman to whom he is already betrothed but with whom he has not consummated their relationship in marriage, is already pregnant.

Wow, can you imagine?

You're engaged to be married to the love of your life, that sweet, innocent, beautiful girl and suddenly she turns up pregnant and you know the child is not yours.

What would you do? Probably many of us would say, "That's easy! The relationship is over. The wedding is off."

But the decision wasn't so easy for Joseph because things were different in 1st century Jerusalem.

Marriage customs of Jewish culture at that time usually included two basic stages of the relationship, the betrothal and the wedding. After a spouse was chosen, a formal prenuptial agreement was made before witnesses, and the young man and woman then entered into an official state of betrothal.

This was a legally binding contract, which gave the man legal rights over the woman, and it could only be broken by a formal process of divorce.

Mary and Joseph have been betrothed - that is, solemnly contracted by their families to be married at some later date. Sexual unfaithfulness with another person during this betrothal stage was considered adultery, the penalty for which was death by stoning.

By the time of the story we just read, Mary was approximately four months pregnant. The gospel of Luke tells us that she spent three months with Elizabeth, her "relative," but then returned to Nazareth where she was found to be pregnant.

The fact that Mary is pregnant before she and Joseph have married is shameful in the extreme - both for Mary and her family.

But Joseph was a "righteous" man. As a devout follower of the Mosaic Law, he would want to break the union with someone who had so seriously broken the Law.

Without yet knowing the supernatural origin of conception, Joseph thinks Mary has committed adultery. As a righteous man it was appropriate for him to obtain a certificate of divorce. But at this point Joseph experiences a personal dilemma.

He can't follow through and marry her, because that would condone what he thinks is Mary's sin of adultery. Divorce for adultery was not optional, but mandatory among many groups in ancient Judaism, because adultery produced a state of impurity that, as a matter of legal fact, dissolved the marriage. However, Joseph's concern for Mary's long-term reputation compelled him to avoid exposing Mary to public disgrace.

That left Joseph with two options.

On the one hand, he could seek a public divorce, where her condition would become known overtly. But then she could be subject to community disgrace as an adulteress, and it could make her liable to be stoned according to the law.

On the other hand, he could divorce her privately. The law didn't require the deed to be made public, making allowance for a relatively private divorce. The latter was the only option that would allow Joseph to maintain his personal righteousness according to the law and yet save Mary from public disgrace and from possible death.

Joseph's character and compassion are revealed in this dilemma as Matthew tells us that "he didn't want to expose her to public disgrace" so he "had in mind to divorce her quietly."

I think, Joseph is a great example for us today in his balance between strict obedience to the law and compassion. Joseph's obedience to the law was not legalistic. He wanted desperately to obey the law, but he also wanted to show compassion for Mary and was concerned for her well-being. He modelled a great balance of righteousness and love just as Jesus would in years to come.

After Joseph had considered these things. That is, after he had thought through it and made up his mind about what he wanted to do, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph.

The angel speaks to Joseph in a dream. This is a striking moment in Joseph's life; all of what he knows—his life, his religion, his ethics—is being questioned by an angel in a dream, and that angel is inviting him to forsake all that knowledge and understanding to participate in a larger story.

And Joseph awoke with an entirely different take on his life.

He would still face some challenges involved with what others would think about him, he now knew that he was right in the centre of God's will... exactly where he wanted to be... exactly where we all should want to be. No longer was Joseph filled with anxiety over the future; rather, he was filled with holy expectation that he and Mary were being used by God to fulfil the promises God had made so long ago.

So, Joseph awoke in the morning and did what he had to do. He began emptying himself. He let go of fear. He let go of the neighbour's voices. He let go of his doubts and questions. He let go of his own reputation and standing in the community. He let go of his ideas and hopes for what his marriage to Mary could have been. He let go of the law and punishment. With each letting go Joseph emptied himself so that, by God's grace and mercy, he might become the womb that would protect, nourish, and provide security to Mary and her child.

I do believe that Joseph guides us to Christmas reminding us that before a womb can be filled it must first be empty. He invites to enter the night of faith and to begin emptying ourselves of all that keeps our womb closed. We must let go of all those things that make our womb inaccessible. Things like fear, guilt, resentment and anger, the thoughts that say we are not enough, the doubts of God's presence, the isolation and loneliness of loss and sorrow.

Letting go creates space, openness, and opportunity for God.

Over and over we let go, emptying ourselves until we find that we are nothing and have nothing. That nothingness is our empty womb offered with scandalous faith that it will be filled with God, we will be re-created, the world will hear good news, and once again we will discover God is with us.

Emmanuel (the true God, the living God) is coming down to us. Be prepared.