

Sermon for 21/12/2025

Based on Matthew 1:18-25

Introduction

Matthew was a Jew. He was writing for Jews, to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah. He showed how Jesus fulfilled OT prophecy. His aim was to enable Jewish Christians to overcome the attacks of non-Christian Jews and to present to them Jesus as their true King. The first verse of Matthew's gospel begins, literally "The book of the genesis of Jesus the Messiah" 1:1. To qualify as the long-awaited Messiah, or anointed king, a person would have to be an heir to the promise of Abraham and a legal descendant of King David. Matthew's genealogy is designed to demonstrate Jesus' identity both as the legal heir of the royal line of David and as a child born of the Virgin Mary without having physically descended from Joseph.

Literally, Matt. 1:16 says, "Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Mary gave birth to Jesus who is called the Messiah". We see some interesting points here. Previous entries in the genealogy connected Abraham and Isaac, Jesse and David with the Greek word "Gennao" to indicate that the 1st person brought forth the second, i.e. was his father. When women are named in the genealogy it is clear that the man was considered the ancestor through normal procreation. Remember the AV? Abraham begat Isaac, and so on. However, when we get to Jesus, Matthew describes his origin in a way that disconnects his physical generation from Joseph and instead links it to Mary. We're told, Joseph is the husband of Mary, from whom Jesus was brought forth (gennao). Jesus is the legal son of Joseph who is born of the royal line of David.

The Betrothal and Joseph's Predicament

At Christmas time each year Christians around the world celebrate the well-loved yet amazing story of the Saviour's birth. Let's look at the story from the point of view of Joseph, who is often overlooked. Now Mary had been visited by an angel to inform her of the miraculous conception she would experience (Luke 1:26-38). But Joseph, well he was totally unprepared for the incredible news of Mary's pregnancy. To have a pregnant fiancée during the betrothal period was about as scandalous as you could get.

Let's have a look at what betrothal meant in those days, then at Joseph's options. Keep in mind that Matthew is writing for Jews, and they are going to be interested in the legal ins and outs of the situation and interested in Joseph's predicament.

Betrothal was a binding relationship and unfaithfulness was regarded as adultery. A formal contract was signed and that included some kind of dowry or exchange of property between the families. After a year of betrothal, the marriage was celebrated, usually with a great feast. Both Matthew and Luke tell how the Holy Spirit took the initiative in the conception of Jesus. There were occasions in the OT where God's action brought about the birth of a man of God (Gen. 18, 1 Sam.) The same happened in the case of John the Baptist. But nowhere is it suggested that both parents were not involved. Here in v. 25 it is made clear that Joseph was not the physical father of Jesus – that he did not have relations with Mary before the birth of Jesus. Now, because the betrothal was binding, a divorce would be necessary. Joseph, a just man, wished to do the correct legal thing. The alternatives were: a. A court case- Mary faced being stoned to death for adultery; or he could give her a writ in the presence of two witnesses. He chose the latter. We're told that Joseph thought long and hard about this predicament. Then God came to put his mind at rest

through a messenger from Heaven. “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife” - this addressed his emotions – “for the child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit” - that answered his questions. Then Joseph was given, in a nutshell, the gospel of salvation:

“She will bear a son, and you shall call him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” 1:21. Joseph’s response was immediate obedience.

The Virgin Birth and Prophecy

Matthew interrupts the narrative for the sake of sceptical Jewish readers who may be scoffing at the idea of a virgin birth. To preempt their objections he showed how the virgin conception of the Messiah was in fact foretold by the prophet Isaiah.

Matthew’s reference to Is. 7:14 is what is called an indirect and veiled prophecy concerning a virgin giving birth. Matthew goes back to the days of King Ahaz of Judah who feared that his Kingdom, and indeed the entire line of David, would be terminated by an alliance of his enemies, the northern kingdoms of Israel and Syria. God invited the king to ask for a sign, but he refused. In response, Isaiah gave Ahaz a sign of God’s faithfulness against the threat. He told Ahaz that a woman who was a virgin at the time, would conceive and bear a child who would be called “Immanuel” – meaning “God with us” - a sign of God’s presence and protection. Before that child grew to be old enough to know right from wrong, the enemies would have been defeated. This child was born to Isaiah and in Ch.8 Isaiah goes further to develop the crucial theme of the birth of a child, “God with us” and the preservation of David’s line and throne. In Ch. 9 Isaiah incorporates these themes in a message that can only be fulfilled by the coming of the Messiah. (:6-7). In other words the prophecy has a near and far fulfilment. The ultimate fulfilment is the Virgin Mary and the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. Matthew’s Jewish readers would have understood this explanation of OT prophecy.

The Importance of the Virgin Birth

Joseph became Mary’s faithful protector, and the couple would have likely borne the brunt of rumour, gossip, and ugly condemnation. Being a righteous man, Joseph did what was right regardless of the personal cost. It couldn’t have been easy! Contrary to Catholic teaching, after their marriage Joseph and Mary became the parents of a fairly large family. There is no evidence that Mary remained a virgin for the rest of her life as is taught in Catholicism. And about the family? Catholics say the children were Joseph’s from a previous marriage. The Scripture makes it clear that Joseph and Mary entered into a marriage relationship after Christ’s birth. 1:25.

The importance of the virgin birth needs to be made clear. In order for our redeemer to qualify to pay for our sins and bring salvation, he must be, in one person, fully human, sinless and fully divine. (Heb. 7:25-6). The virgin birth satisfies all 3 of these requirements.

1. The only way Jesus could be a human being was to be born of a woman; 2. The only way he could be sinless was to be conceived by the Holy Spirit (1:20). 3. The only way he could be divine was to have God as his father. As Luke said, “the holy one to be born will be called the son of God” 1:35. Jesus Christ is therefore revealed to us as one divine person with 2 natures – divine and sinless human.
2. In living and suffering as a human person, Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15-16). As the divine Son of God, he has the power to deliver us from sin’s bondage and Satan’s power (Ac. 26:18, Col. 2:15). As divine and human, he qualifies to serve as a sacrifice for the sins of every person, and as high priest to intercede for all who come to God (Heb. 2:9-18 and further in Hebrews).

3. Now I would like us to think about how God spoke to Joseph – in a dream. When we search the Scriptures we see numerous examples of God speaking through dreams in both the Old & New Testaments. The young Joseph (son of Jacob) in Gen. 37:5-10 dreamt that his family would bow down to him – and he told them! God spoke to Jacob in a dream in Gen. 28:10-22 where he saw angels ascending and descending a stairway to heaven. God spoke to Joseph concerning the child to be born to Mary, and later to warn Joseph to flee with Jesus and Mary to Egypt. He spoke to others in dreams, even to people who were nonbelievers, like Pilate's wife.
4. For some time I have heard about Jesus appearing to Muslim people in the Middle East and making himself known to them in dreams. I have just read a wonderful book called "Women Who Risk" by Tom and Joann Doyle who have ministered in that part of the world and are in contact with Christian groups there. Jesus is empowering Muslim women to live for him in the midst of savage brutality and unmitigated evil. Often Jesus is making himself known to men and women in dreams. He's also appearing to them as a man in a white robe – they don't have the Scriptures – but they know it's Jesus and he is doing miracles. When they become Christians they meet for prayer and the study of the Word. They daily face the penalty of death for following Jesus.
5. We've established that dreams are Biblical – or can be – not necessarily – but we need to interpret them in the light of Scripture.
6. According to Kris Reece, author of "How God Speaks to Us in Dreams", there are different kinds of dreams: warning, directional, prophetic, cleansing. There is no time here to explore these. Some are demonic, nightmarish perhaps, some are the products of our own mind. Perhaps it is our busyness in mind and body that keeps us from remembering our dreams. Or perhaps we are too logical and explain things away so that we are not open to revelation.

One thing we can be sure of, God longs to be in a relationship with us and that relationship is a two-way street – he wants to hear from us and he wants to communicate with us. The best way to hear his voice and know his heart is through his word. If he speaks in dreams, his communication will always be in line with his word.

Let me finish: The wonderful message of Christmas is "Immanuel" – God with us. May the Lord be with you in a deeper and more meaningful way this Christmas.

Carmen Nelson

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