

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ
according to Saint Matthew

Glory to you, O Lord

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. 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.

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. 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."

All this took place to fulfil 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").

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary

home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

This is the Gospel of the Lord
Praise to you, O Christ

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. **Amen.**

Today the church celebrates Joseph of Nazareth.

Marriage customs have weakened with the times.

It is no longer a requirement for a man to have his girlfriend's father's permission to marry her – although as anyone knows it is helpful if the parents at least approve!

And it is no longer a requirement for a dowry to be paid, partly because the woman is no longer thought of as somehow the property of her father, to be 'bought' by her fiancé.

She is a person in her own right, making independent choices about her own life.

The marriage customs that do remain are largely superficial, and sometimes kept out of superstition or out of a desire to look good for the photographs – brides wear white meringue-type

dresses, grooms wear morning suits, and when they reach their home, the groom may well lift up his new wife and carry her over the thresh-hold.

But when Matthew was writing his gospel the traditions of marriage were not optional.

They were absolutely compulsory.

And they began long before the wedding.

Betrothal, or engagement, was a legal relationship, just as binding as a marriage.

The woman (more so than the man) was committed to faithfulness, although the marriage would not be consummated until after the wedding.

The only way out of a betrothal was to get a divorce.

The amount of publicity arising from a broken betrothal lay in the hands of the bridegroom – if he found his fiancée to be unfaithful, he would be quite within his rights to have her publicly stoned.

So imagine how Joseph felt.

Good, humble, hardworking Joseph.

A man of integrity and honour.

A man looking forward to a life with a woman he had recognised to be gracious, gentle and true.

He must have thanked God daily for bringing the two of them together.

And then what happens?

Mary tells him she's pregnant.

And he knows for sure that the baby is not his.

We do not know what he believed at first, nor what Mary said to him.

What would most men think if their fiancée said yes, she was pregnant, but no, she had never slept with anyone?

We can only guess at his bewilderment and at the agony of the decisions he felt forced to make.

Had he been so wrong about Mary's integrity?

Joseph wanted to obey the law but he didn't want to expose Mary to public shame.

So he planned to annul the contract privately.

But just as he came to this agonizing decision, he had a dream.

And the angel had appeared to Mary, so an angel came to Joseph.

And the angel said that he need have no fear about marrying his Mary, for she was indeed a woman of integrity.

She really was the woman chosen by God to bear his son.

And Joseph was the man chosen by God to look after her.

Matthew, writing a Jewish gospel, shows how the scriptures are to be fulfilled; literally fleshed out and completed.

The very word Jesus was popularly translated as “Yahweh is Salvation”. In Isaiah the Hebrew word young-girl becomes in the Greek translation “virgin” and Matthew uses one to reinforce the other, but for him the emphasis primarily to be on the concept of the Saviour, of Emmanuel, God-with-us.

For when in Jewish history had God come to his people as a child?

In the clouds yes, and in the thunder, in the wind, as a voice calling his servants or speaking through his prophets, but never before had he offered himself as a tiny vulnerable human being. At the time so few knew it was to happen and he came, as the old carol says, so silently.

He may come into our lives in the same way, in a form we find hard to recognise, and perhaps preceded by turmoil and doubt, when all our carefully laid plans become suddenly useless, and we are shaken by events we cannot understand.

Joseph needed the steadying voice of God in his dream.

We may not have so clear a directive, but we do have the voice of the one whom Joseph was asked to protect.

We have the presence of the Christ who was to grow to a man fully sharing our humanity and whose promise is to be with us until time and our world come to an end.

Amen.