

## Calming Joseph's Fears

The gospel for this coming Sunday (Fourth Sunday in Advent) is Matthew 1:18-25. This is the account of the Lord appearing to Joseph about the pregnancy of Mary even though they were not married.

Being pregnant without being married was really a big deal in the Israelite culture of that time. By Jewish law Joseph had the right to bring his fiancée before a court of law to prove her infidelity, which could result in her being stoned to death (Deut. 22:23-24). Or he could break the marriage contract by divorcing her quietly. He has much to agonize over because he loved Mary and was a just man.

Verses 18b–19 shows Joseph's perception of the situation and his pious, yet uninformed, decision. Mary "was found" (presumably by Joseph) to be pregnant with the result that righteous and compassionate Joseph decided to cancel the legal marriage created by their betrothal. This is the natural human evaluation of the "origin" of Jesus Christ. Since his origin is not from Joseph, Mary's betrothed, it must have been from a sinful union between Mary and another man. Ironically, although the narrator has informed the hearers/readers that Mary is pregnant "from the Holy Spirit," Joseph can act only on the basis of his own logical understanding of the child's origin. Joseph's plan to divorce Mary discreetly would leave both his righteousness (his conformity to the law) and his compassion intact. Joseph is, for the right reasons, about to do the wrong thing, but God intervenes.

The angel took Joseph through some prophecies of the OT that helped Joseph to understand what was going on and his role in this great event. The angel doesn't just tell Joseph things but also explains: Baby's name, "Jesus means to save his people from their sins." Joseph like so many Israelites had been looking for the coming Messiah. To have Mary be the mother must have been mind-blowing. But he doesn't doubt

Joseph got up and did as he was commanded. His faith in God's interpretation of the events is shown by his about-face, doing what he earlier feared to do ("Do not be afraid to take Mary into your home, as your wife," so "he took his wife into his home").

This time of the year can leave us wondering. In our world there is so much minimizing of the true meaning of Christmas. But like Joseph, God does not leave us in the haze of the season. The Lord, too, shows us the true meaning of Christmas through his Word with an un-mistakable message of comfort. He reminds us that the Immanuel of long ago continues to be with us every day.

Prayer: O Holy Spirit, strengthen my faith, and fill me with joy as I reflect on the miracle of Christ's birth. Amen (TLSB)