

13 DECEMBER 2015

READING: Matthew 1:18-25

BACKGROUND OF THE READING

Joseph was betrothed/promised to Mary. The Greek word is related to the verb used for “remember” because it was a ceremony which was to be remembered when a person was espoused or committed to another for marriage.

In the Old Testament times the betrothal ceremony continued in a conventional fashion the recollection of the time when a woman was purchased from her family (Deut. 20:7). When a woman was designated (Ex. 21:8, 9) by the head of her family as the future wife of another man, the prospective bridegroom paid a certain sum of money (or service as in the case of Jacob). A contract, which was inviolable, was then entered into (Gen. 34:12; Ex. 22:17). Until the time of the actual marriage, the bride-to-be remained in her own family. It was not permissible to betroth her to any other man except by action amounting to divorce, and any violation of the rights established by the betrothal was as serious as if the two persons had been ceremonially married (Deut. 22:23, 24).

It is impossible to say with precision just how soon the wedding followed betrothal. In later times, in the case of a virgin, it was after the lapse of a year, and at least thirty days in the case of a widow.

Probably the ceremony of betrothal in NT times involved the following acts: First, a contract drawn up by the parents or by the friend of the bridegroom. Second, the meeting of the two families concerned, with other witnesses, at which time the groom gave the bride jewellery (Gen. 24:53) and declared his intention to observe the terms of the contract already arranged. Third, the payment of the mōhar by the prospective bridegroom. This occurred during a ceremony at which a priest may have been present. The status of the man and woman was now, as in Hebrew times, practically the same as that of married persons, although it was generally customary for the wedding ceremony proper to be celebrated at a later date. As in the older times, separation of betrothed persons demanded a divorce, and there seems to have been no taboo in their living together as man and wife previous to the wedding ceremony. The

children of such a union would be regarded as legitimate. Insofar as the virgin Mary and Joseph are concerned, the use of the verb *mnēsteúomai*, to betroth (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:27; 2:5), indicates a betrothal ceremony. There is no mention, however, of a subsequent wedding ceremony. It was during this period of betrothal that the angel appeared to Mary (Matt. 1:18). It is clearly stated, however, that the angel appeared to announce to Mary her conception by the Holy Spirit before she had sexual relations with Joseph. The same angel also appeared to Joseph to tell him of the supernatural conception of his betrothed, Mary.

The penalty for adultery under Old Testament law was death by stoning, and this penalty applied to infidelity during betrothal as well (Deut 22:23–24). In New Testament times, Joseph would have merely been required to divorce Mary and expose her to shame; the death penalty was rarely if ever executed for this offense. (Betrothals were so binding that if a woman's fiancé died, she was considered a widow; betrothals could otherwise be terminated only by divorce.)

But a woman with a child, divorced for such infidelity, would be hard pressed ever to find another husband, leaving her without means of support if her parents died.

When Joseph discovers Mary's pregnancy, he naturally assumes that she has been unfaithful to him. He is called a "righteous" man, which for Matthew does not imply sinless perfection but regularly refers to one who is law-abiding, upright in character, and generally obedient and faithful to God's commandments. Here Joseph's righteousness leads him to want to spare Mary the disgrace of public divorce and censure and the legal proceedings for a suspected adulteress. Jewish laws typically required a man to divorce an adulterous wife, but Joseph proposes to divorce her "quietly," which is perhaps better translated "privately", in the sense of a settlement out of court. With a simple document signed by two witnesses, Joseph could have divorced her without making her shame more widely known.

In the Old Testament, angels often brought messages in dreams. The Old Testament does mention expert dream interpreters, like Daniel (Dan 1:17; 2:19–45) and Jacob's son Joseph (Gen 37:5–11; 40–41). In Joseph's case the angel appeared twice to him in his dreams.

The name Jesus (Aramaic Yēshuaʿ, Greek Jēsous) means “God is salvation” in Hebrew. Parents often intended the names they gave children to have some meaning, but if God gave the name, it had special significance. The Old Testament taught that God’s people would be saved in the time of the Messiah (Jer 23:5–6), and Jewish readers in the first century would have understood this salvation to mean more than just personal forgiveness.

In verses 22–23, Matthew cites Isaiah 7:14 and indicates a broad familiarity with Isaiah’s context. In that context, Assyria would lay waste Israel and Aram before “a son” was grown (Is 7:14–17); “a son” thus seems to refer to Isaiah’s own son (8:3–4). But all the names of Isaiah’s children were meant as signs pointing beyond themselves (8:18), and to whom would “Immanuel,” or “God with us” (7:14), more aptly point than to the son of David rightly called “Mighty God” (9:6; cf. 10:21; 11:1)?

The passage climaxes by claiming this child to be “Immanuel,” meaning God with us. Verse 21 introduces the key Matthean theme of God’s presence with his people, which is emphasized again at the end of his Gospel in 28:18–20. At the same time, Matthew wants to emphasize that Jesus, as God, is “with us”; deity is immanent.

In keeping with his “righteous” character (v. 19), Joseph obeys the Lord’s directives (vv. 24–25b). Verse 25a goes beyond what the angel explicitly commands but further refutes any claim that might be made then or later that Joseph himself was Jesus’ biological father.

Joseph acts like Old Testament men and women of God who obeyed God’s call even when it went against all human common sense. Marriage consisted of a covenant, a ceremony and consummation, which ratified the marriage, normally on the first night of the seven-day wedding. Joseph here officially marries Mary but abstains from consummating the marriage until after Jesus is born.

Amen

REFLECTION

Last week I reflected on Mary and her expectant waiting time. Today I have chosen to speak about Joseph and his role in the birth narrative of Jesus.

I have always avoided speaking about Joseph just because I am a man and I always felt it too close to give a “more objective” perspective. But this week I decided to go with it.

When I think of myself as a man in order to understand Joseph I have to admit that in general we, as men, have a few tendencies that can cause bother. Now fellow men, please excuse my generalisations. Men are selfish and egocentric, well most of the times. Men are stubborn and do not want to admit that they have made a mistake. Men are competitive and do not want to be on any losing side or team. Men are proud and do not want to be shamed either privately or in public. Men are rational and only think in rational terms.

So when Matthew as a typical Jewish man of his time tells the story of Joseph he makes the blow a wee bit softer.

He does not say that Joseph lashed out hearing that his beloved is pregnant. He does not say what Joseph really thought about the situation. He only tells us that Joseph was rational in deciding to get out of the contract that he entered with Mary because she betrayed him with another man. He says that Joseph was a righteous man who wanted to do the right thing. He does not describe Joseph’s true feelings or reactions.

But clearly God knew Joseph and all his thoughts. He knew his suspicions. He knew his plans to end the “betrothal” with Mary.

So God send his messenger who spoke to Joseph in a dream. It is interesting to spot the difference between the angel’s appearance to Mary and Joseph. While the angel confronted Mary in person, the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. I cannot help wondering that this is not coincidental. Is it because of Joseph’s stubborn manly nature to be first confrontational - that the angel did not approach him directly? And if this happened only once, I think we could have accepted it. But twice the angel of God approached him in a dream. Joseph might have been righteous and all but after all he was still a man like you and me.

So where am I going with this? Well, our reading proves that God can do anything and everything. To Him everything is possible. He can break through any resilience or opposition we might have. And yes He is in charge of our human nature and even the stubbornness person whether

it is a man or a woman, have no control over God's almightiness. To God just like in the case of Mary, everything is possible.

Joseph is the symbol of resistance against God. What happened to him, is, can and will also happen today with anyone resisting God's working in the world. Our reading focus entirely on the theme of "Immanuel – God is with us". God chose to come and live amongst human beings like you and me. And God is still with us today through his Holy Spirit.

Whenever we read the story of Joseph, whenever we think of the birth of Jesus we must have hope and rejoice because God is with us. Whenever we doubt, whenever we lose hope, whenever we resist God and His church, we must think of God that is with us. And when we talk about people that openly resists God or want to stop anyone talking about God, then we must not despair. To God everything and anything is possible. He convinced Joseph to say YES. He can do the same with you, me and whoever resists His calling to serve Him.

So let us go out and tell everyone to be ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. And if they resist, think of Joseph and have hope. Pray for them and let God work with them in His own time, and in His way according to His will. No-one on this earth can change the heart of a person. Only God can. No-one on this earth can convert a non-believer to believe. Only God can!

Amen