

Family service 18 December 2011

Reading:

Luke 2: 4- 21

Matthew 1:18-25

When you read Matthew version of the birth of Jesus it is from the perspective of Joseph while Luke's version is from the perspective of Mary. And to add to the confusion: Mark does not mention the birth at all?

Why is there then such a big difference between the Gospels? Well the answer is quite simple. They all had different congregations to whom they addressed their messages of the good news of the Gospel. Mark is the oldest and serves as a source for Matthew and Luke. But often Luke and Matthew use and add the accounts of Mark. Luke was written to all the people living on the margins of their society, the "haves", the "have nots".

Matthew was written to a Jewish congregation who converted to Christendom. They would have been predominantly male and patriarchal. They would also be very strict in how they perceived sensitive issues like having a baby out of wedlock!

And it is then from this perspective that we must look into the text as well:

Matthew is very careful when picking his words. He says that they were rightfully engaged to each other. In their society it usually

happened when the children was between 12 and 14. Betrothal (erusin) then was more binding than most engagements are today and was normally accompanied by the groom's payment of at least part of the bride price. Betrothal, which commonly lasted a year, meant that bride and groom were officially pledged to each other but had not yet consummated the marriage; advances toward anyone else were thus regarded as adulterous (Deut 22:23–27). Two witnesses, mutual consent (normally) and the groom's declaration were necessary to establish Jewish betrothals.

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.

But because divorces could be affected by a simple document with two witnesses, Joseph could have divorced her without making her shame more widely known.

Matthew says that Joseph was a righteous man meaning that he kept the Law of Moses. Matthew also stresses the fact that Joseph was not guilty of anything. He was merely a vehicle of God Almighty.

In our society for a long time men, especially in the culture I came from when a girl got pregnant she would be in trouble.

But I guess the message is Joseph listened to God speaking. Maybe we must do the same even if we have to sacrifice.

Amen