

Matthew 1:18-25
“A Christmas I can believe in - Joseph”

So here we go with that certain time of the year. When all sorts of strange things happen - or so we're told.

When **Good King Wenceslas** plods out into the snow again, followed by a rather timid page.

When the secret work of **elves** somewhere up north comes to light.

When **three kings from Persian lands afar** follow a star across the deserts.

When **the snowman** can talk and fly and even dance around the garden.

When a group of **reindeer** become lighter than air, and magically able to pull a sled that looks as if it should be heavier than lead.

When they try to persuade us that it's sensible to **max out your credit cards** ... as if the bills will never come in in January.

When a **big man in a red suit** slides down the chimneys of houses that don't have them in order to leave yet more presents at the foot of a **pretend indoor forest**.

And a **virgin gives birth to a baby**, long ago and far away.

Oh, and it **snows** ... *let it snow!!* ... but the pipes don't freeze.

It is all a very strange mixture, isn't it! That is the whole problem. When we're **kids**, we probably at least sort-of-believe it all. But as we grow up, the whole lot of it seems to evaporate as so much wishful thinking and seasonal make-believe.

A few weeks ago, I heard what I think is probably the Lidl slogan for its Christmas campaign, which really put its finger on the problem here. It's called "**a Christmas you can believe in**". Implication: the whole mixture of stuff that I've just flashed quickly before you *isn't*.

Of course, they're not really trying to persuade you to believe anything, but just to buy their stuff. First of all when I heard that slogan I was a bit annoyed. But then I stopped and thought about it a bit. And yes, you do have to say that some of "**the Christmas story**", as we call it, is a bit of a stretch. I mean ...

Angels?

A moving star?

A virgin birth?

That is not the stuff of everyday experience. It's only fair to admit that. But, I thought, there are some incredibly down-to-earth bits to those accounts of the birth of Jesus that Matthew and Luke record for us, things that really ring true. Things that show me these accounts weren't written as made-up fairy tales, with obvious stupid exaggerations and

omissions, but recording totally credible responses of normal human beings in incredible situations.

No, actually, I'm going to have to change that. Not *incredible* - meaning, precisely, *not* believable. I mean the totally credible - believable - responses of normal human beings in very strange situations. But situations that those down-to-earth observations of normality make, to me, credible. And so it's not just **a Christmas that we *can* believe in**, but a Christmas that we ***must*** believe in.

So over the next couple of weeks, we'll be looking at four of the characters in this "Christmas story": Elizabeth, Mary, and Herod; and today ... **Joseph**. We read those probably very familiar words earlier. Let's go back and have another look, shall we?

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, ...

(Matthew 1:18)

We've had Joseph's name listed in the genealogy that precedes this:

... and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

(Matthew 1:16)

So right away, we're taking a step backwards from that. The genealogy gives the complete list, but we're going back to where Joseph is only *betrothed* to Mary. That's a rather quaint word for us nowadays, but it's a useful word to retain in this context. It's quite a bit more than simply "engaged" in our society nowadays. Though if you go back at least a century, engagements were a whole lot more serious. There's a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, ***Trial by Jury***, a musical comedy all about the serious crime(!) of "breach of promise of marriage".

So Joseph and Mary are already a couple. They are getting used to each other's ways and likings. Unlike our modern society, though, the sexual "try before you buy" is *not* acceptable.

All of that "but we have to find out if we're compatible *in bed*" is just the common present-day excuse to avoid God's design for the relationship of marriage. You can just as coherently argue - and the Bible *does* - that you should find out if you are compatible in the more normal and outward aspects of a relationship - and publicly commit to one another in marriage - *before* daring to venture into that aspect of intimacy. The argument runs at least as well in the way *opposite* to how it is typically presented nowadays.

And so, with that background, the rest of verse 18 has to be an enormous shock.

When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

(Matthew 1:18)

Now you will get some cynics who would argue that "with child from the Holy Spirit" is just a polite way to say "pregnant by some anonymous man". Joseph can know with certainty that this child is not his. But if Matthew had wanted to leave his readers in the

same quandary as Joseph, he could just have written: “found to be with child”. So I think that Matthew here is not beating about the bush with a polite euphemism, but making a very clear claim to something miraculous happening. So we *know* what is going on, behind the scenes. But Joseph doesn’t. And therefore it leaves him with a serious quandary.

And this is the bit that, to me, is one of those specially convincing bits of normality. You can almost hear the gears engaging in his thinking process as he works his way through this awful situation. And Matthew also gives us some insight about his general character, too, which I think is just beautifully almost understated here, but really quite profound. Here is the character summary, first of all:

And her husband Joseph, being a just man ...

(Matthew 1:19)

Notice the terminology, just in passing. They are “only” betrothed, not yet fully and formally married, but already, according to the terminology of the day, he is Mary’s “husband”. That is why Matthew records the rest of the verse, I think. But before we move onto his thoughts and decision, here’s the character: a *just* man. So he is going to seek to do what is right and fair - even, I think we can presume, if that is a difficult call. It harks back to one of the psalms, I thought, the kind of person ...

... who honours those who fear the LORD; who swears to his own hurt and does not change;

(Psalms 15:4)

So here’s quite a lesson for us, isn’t it? Faced with this horrendous situation ... faced, no doubt, with immense feelings of disappointment and probably, I would imagine, betrayal ... *how can I now respond in a way that is just, and upright, and godly?* Folks, a situation could crop up in our lives at any moment that requires us to respond with that kind of question. Instead of lashing out, instead of retaliating, instead of the natural response, how does a believer in Jesus Christ respond? What is just, right now? What is upright, in this situation? What is godly, and will glorify my heavenly Father?

So initially his answer is not what we would maybe immediately come up with. But look how Matthew describes his thinking process here, as he arrives at his decision:

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

(Matthew 1:19)

First of all, “unwilling”. Just basically *not inclined* towards causing offence or pain. He might feel outraged and betrayed. He probably feels some kind of shame by association alone. So his normal human response might well be to dump that shame *where it’s properly due*, by making a public spectacle of his squeaky-cleanliness and *her* (he might not even feel he wants to use her name again) shameful sin. Instead ... look how his instinct is actually to love even when hurt, to *not* retaliate by himself inflicting pain or hurt. He might no longer be able to marry her ... it wouldn’t be decent ... but neither would it be honourable or just to publicly vilify Mary.

Next, “resolved” - though I think this translation is maybe slightly overstating what Matthew says. The AV’s “was minded to” is perhaps a bit better. Of course he has been

turning these things over in his mind. He could scarcely think of anything else, could he? But, although constrained on one side by his unwillingness to publicly shame Mary, she has apparently done something ... to use the Biblical phrase ...

“... some indecency in her, ...”

(Deuteronomy 24:1)

... well, plainly, Mary has done something of a sufficient degree of indecency that divorce was permitted. Notice in passing that even *betrothal* in those days either had to be followed through to marriage, or terminated by *divorce*. Not that divorce was mandated by the OT law, but was a permissible and guilt-free course for Joseph to take.

But he hasn't just jumped to that position. He is a *just* man, trying to do what is fair. And he is coming down to the conclusion, that's how I read the nuance here, he “is minded to”, even if he does not yet regard the decision as final as the ESV suggests:

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

(Matthew 1:19)

Just let her go, and move on. No incendiary public denunciations. As quietly as could be legal and proper. Sad. Disappointed. But what would kicking up a stink achieve?

And yet something as enormous as this is not easy to just decide. We find him still turning the whole thing over, on one particular night - hence the mention of a dream, I'm presuming. Still picking it over, still wondering if there is any better course. So, finally here, “considering”

But as he considered these things, ...

(Matthew 1:20)

A different thinking word again there. He might say he had decided - but he still re-visits the chain of thinking that led him to that conclusion. And around and around his thoughts go, as the candles burn low. Emotionally as well as physically exhausted, perhaps, he **can no longer keep his eyes open**.

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, ...

(Matthew 1:20)

And here is an answer that Joseph could never have discovered by any amount of thinking for himself:

... saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

(Matthew 1:20-21)

And yes, this has all been planned from way back!

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

(Matthew 1:22-23)

And see, Joseph, it fits. “With child from the Holy Spirit” ... as a man called Matthew will report it, a few decades time ... yes, that really is what’s going on here.

And what happens now also fits, I think, with what we have seen of Joseph. A just man, and thoughtful ... and now we see why. I think we could maybe call him “devout”, or just simply “believing”: ready to believe, and ready to act on his belief, when he is sure. There are three points of obedience here that Matthew specifically notes:

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

(Matthew 1:24-25)

“He took his wife”. I’m wondering whether that means he actually went ahead and formally married her, upgrading from “betrothal” to marriage. I certainly don’t remember seeing it in the Bible happening at any other time. Maybe the date had been arranged already, and he just went ahead with the plans that had already been made. Perhaps at that stage very few other people knew about Mary’s predicament.

Whether anyone else knew or not, Joseph knows that he has opted for a much more difficult road than the one he had previously been considering. But, the way Matthew writes it, doesn’t it feel as if Joseph now just gets on and *does* this? Just as the divorce was to have been no-fuss, so (perhaps) is the wedding. No drama implied about what a sacrifice he is making. Just “he took his wife”.

“He knew her not”. Delicately put. And quite a big deal to postpone that eventual union. I’m not sure that I see this as a specific command from the angel, though. So maybe this is a deduction. Maybe Joseph has concluded from the angel’s quotation from Isaiah about a *virgin* conceiving, that anything in that department between them would “muddy the waters”? Without Matthew’s clear testimony that Joseph *just couldn’t* have been the father of Jesus, you’ll get people arguing that it’s a miracle of an unusually short gestation ... and yes, *nudge, nudge, you know what THAT means, really!*

So maybe going “above and beyond” the angel’s clear command - but doesn’t this totally fit with Joseph being a clear-thinking, honourable man? It is just so fully and entirely in character. A Christmas story that you can definitely believe in.

“He called his name Jesus”. You shall. He did. Really quite simple stuff. But profound, because this is precisely the Saviour that you and I need.

And despite the fact that the second half of Matthew chapter 1 is by no means “a story of everyday country folk”, I think I see enough consistency here in these few verses showing us Joseph quietly but reliably and honourably in the background, that I regard this as

A Christmas you can believe in

And, more importantly

A Saviour you can believe in

And by whom you and I can find eternal life:

“She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

(Matthew 1:21)