

Prayer

We praise You, great and glorious Lord!
Great things are happening on earth because of You!
People are saved for eternity by Your love and gracious judgement!
In You, the oppressed are delivered and the poor are given hope!
All this, and more, is real evidence of Your Kingdom!
We praise You, great and glorious Lord!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Pastors

Pray today for the care of people in your church, through personal contact and through the preaching of the Word of God. Pray for all who perform these tasks in your church.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for food and drink
- Pray for those who are the victims of political violence today
- Pray for the world of sport, and pray for integrity in its financing

Meditation

Though the world hosts evil and is pregnant with trouble,
I will give thanks to the Lord forever:

Though my enemies tear me apart, body, soul and spirit,
I will take refuge in the love of my Saviour:

Though I am weary from Satan's harassment and pursuit,
I will find my rest in the Lord my God:

Though what I have done has made me guilty in God's sight,
I will trust my life to His candid judgement:

Though the Lord has been awoken to injustice in the world,
I will work each day with honest intent.

Though the minds and hearts of the righteous are tested,
I will place my faith in Christ Jesus my Lord.

Though the world, by mischief digs itself a pit, and falls in;
I will praise the Lord and give thanks to His Name!

Bible Study - Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph, but before they were married, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Now Joseph her husband was a righteous man, so wanting to spare her any public shame, he decided to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ However, after he had decided on this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to marry Mary, because she has conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you must name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. ²² All this has happened to fulfil what the Lord had said

through the prophet: ²³ 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' which means, 'God with us.'"

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not have sex with her until her son was born; and he gave him the name Jesus.

Review

In our passage today, Matthew tells us about Jesus' miraculous birth by changing the focus of his Gospel from the 'wide angle' view of the genealogy to the 'close up' of Mary and Joseph's circumstances at the time. The central character of this part of the story is Joseph, who acts in response to God's prompting through dreams to protect Jesus and His mother. Whilst the Gospel of Luke concentrates upon the figure of Mary, Matthew focuses on Joseph; and in each Gospel, an angel is responsible for both guidance and protection of the holy family (1:20). The faithfulness shown by Joseph in the whole story is remarkable, for we are told at the beginning that he knows he is not the father of Mary's child, but he nevertheless takes responsibility for Him with complete integrity. Joseph is a model of responsibility, initiative, response to God and humble service in the face of dangerous odds; it is a story that stirs the heart! He was the father that the earthly Jesus could learn from and look up to in preparation for the onerous task of His ministry.

Our text today records what is called the 'virgin birth'. The Church has long held this to be an article of faith, and yet today, some are happy to dispense with this notion. There are those who dismiss the idea that Jesus' birth could be a miracle, and even question the relevance of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 which undergirds this story (1:22,23). Matthew's purpose however, is to tell us who Jesus is, and at this point in the Bible, nothing could be more important. The genealogy traced a male line from Abraham, the father of 'faith' in God, through King David to Joseph; but we are left with a quandary. Firstly, Joseph was not married to Mary when she became pregnant, and Matthew was able to explain why for both historic and also theological reasons.

In the manner of their day, Joseph and Mary were pledged to each other and were formally engaged; this was a solemn step on the path to marriage in which the couple held the same responsibilities to each other of formal marriage, but without sex. Mary's pregnancy was therefore a scandal, and with extraordinary literary impact Matthew declared that the Holy Spirit was responsible (1:18)! He does not say that the Holy Spirit worked through the earthly father to create the child within Mary, but took the place of the earthly father; so this was no ordinary miracle. It was unique. Jews and Christians have always believed that the Holy Spirit is involved in the process of the creation of a child, but in the case of Jesus, the Holy Spirit's role was exclusive.

Joseph weighed up his options in verse 19, and action he took, from a strict Jewish perspective, was questionable, but an angel appeared to him to indicate what he should do (1:20). None of us can imagine what an experience such as this does to a person, but the angel asked Joseph to take the burden of the problem upon himself. The instruction to 'marry Mary', (1:20) was tantamount to a public confession that he had sex with Mary whilst betrothed. Making one's betrothed pregnant was hardly the sin of adultery even in those days, and it would have compromised him in the eyes of many people. At great personal risk, he did not expose Mary to the humiliation of a public court to ascertain who the father was, because Mary and perhaps even he could well have been stoned. So Joseph, whilst meticulously righteous, was asked to take on 'unrighteousness' for the sake of his wife, and for the sake of the child to be born. In doing this he points to the work of the Christ.

Our passage concludes with the memorable comment by Matthew (1:22,23) that the whole birth of Jesus fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14), and he explains carefully that

Jesus is 'Immanuel' or 'God with us', according to the prophecy of Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14). This prophecy is amazing in itself and sets the tone for the whole Gospel that lies ahead. Isaiah's prophecy is not just included to explain the 'virgin birth'; it is there because like a true prophecy, it helps us interpret what is happening, so that we may know God's Word.

This amazing story holds almost too much for us to look at briefly! This is the promise of the Saviour of the world fulfilled! This is the greatest mystery on earth! This is the moment when heaven and earth touched! How could it be that anyone might expect this amazing event to be rational, logical or explainable! God has come in human form to bless and save the world! Yet at heart, this is a deeply human story of a man and his wife, used by God. Praise be to God that the Saviour came in this way!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Why do you think that Jesus had to be born of Mary by 'virgin birth'?
2. How does this study help you to understand the figure of Joseph? What are the key characteristics of his faith?
3. If Joseph was so important at the beginning of the story, why do you think he fades from the scene in the rest of the Gospel?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The conception of Jesus in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit has been subjected to all manner of literary and historical analysis, but one thing we cannot do is analyse this scientifically! God chose the right moment to come into the world, and I for one, am amazed at what He has done and the way He has done it. We welcome Jesus!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *It is not Christmas time at the moment, but read through this story several times and let it to inspire you afresh in the middle of summer, rather than in the depths of winter! What can you learn?*
- *If you are a man, try to imagine what this story must have been like for Mary. If you are a woman, try to imagine what this story must have been like for Joseph. What does this teach you?*

Final Prayer

Great and Mighty Lord; fix my heart on You with such intensity that no temptations of the evil one can shake me. Keep my feet firmly on Your pathway, guide me securely through my troubles, and bring me safely into Your complete salvation and my journey's end. I ask this through Jesus Christ my Lord; AMEN