

# Advent

(What can we learn about the birth of Jesus?)

## Week 1. Matthew's Nativity Story

### Introduction to Week One

In this session we will explore Matthew's Nativity story, looking at contextual themes, content focus and prophetic fulfilment

### Opening Prayers

O Lord open our lips  
**And our mouth shall declare your praise**

Rejoice and be glad  
For you are the light of the world  
**And great is your reward in heaven**

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes. (Psalm 19)

**Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and redeemer.**

God of gentleness and love  
Draw near to us today as we draw near to you  
Dwell in every heart and conversation as we study Matthew's gospel  
Open our hearts and minds to your message.

Help us to discern together all that you are calling us to be  
And all that you are calling us to do.

Assist us, by your Spirit, to become a more contemplative,  
more compassionate and more courageous Church  
For the building of your kingdom and the glory of your Son.

**Amen**

## Dwelling in the word (part one) Matthew 1.18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

*Keep a few moment's silence. In the silence notice where your attention lingers. It may be a word or phrase which strikes you, or a question you want to ask.*

*Discuss as a group or in pairs the message or thoughts that came into your mind whilst reading the passage*

## What is not said

We don't know much about Joseph other than he was a carpenter by trade and "an upright man". We don't even know how old he was at the time he became betrothed to Mary, but it is likely that he was much older and already established in his trade otherwise the match would not have been made. So, let's get to the reality of the situation. Forget about the chocolate box pictures of love and romance. Mary was a young girl. She would have been kept well away from men other than immediate family. It is unlikely that she had spoken more than a few words with Joseph and she certainly wouldn't have been able to spend time getting to know him. Betrothal was an agreement, a contract arranged between men – Mary would have had no say in this arrangement. Within marriage, divorce was not an option for women and adultery carried the death penalty. In Mary's case, even though they were not married, if Joseph chose to expose the situation and denounce Mary publicly she could have been stoned to death or cast out from her village to fend for herself in a society that did not support single women. The options were limited. If she couldn't find a husband prepared to support her, starvation or prostitution were the alternatives. That's how serious this situation was.

And what about Joseph? It was not good for him either. He had probably felt that his life was ordered and as good as he could expect; established trade; respect in the community; a young bride to be, all dashed in the words 'I'm with child'. To add to his distress, he has a dream in which an angel tells him that the child Mary is carrying is of the Holy Spirit and that he should not be frightened of marrying her. I use the term 'distress' because in the bigger picture of the Christmas story, the gravity of the situation is often missed, and Joseph's dilemma is made to seem simple. How many of us remember let alone believe and make life changing decisions based on our dreams? As to Joseph, what about his feelings, his pride? What about his anger, the feelings of betrayal of trust, the dashing of his plans in the certain knowledge that the baby was not his? Suddenly everything has changed. In contemporary society it is likely that faced with the prospect of his fiancé being pregnant with someone else's child, Joseph would angrily walk away. But this was first century Judea, a country under Roman subjugation yet still locally controlled by a religious hierarchy operating as it had for thousands of years under the Law of Moses.

So, what does Joseph do: believe Mary or believe his dream? What would you do: walk away or expose Mary in public? What's the easy option?

*At this point you may choose to spend a short time discussing these thoughts.*

1. Why was Joseph important in the story?
2. Why didn't Joseph walk away?

## What happens next?

We don't know much about what happened between Mary, her parents, and Joseph other than that, Joseph obeyed the message in his dream and decided to stand by Mary. We can assume they had a quick and quiet wedding. We are told that Joseph had a further dream warning him to escape to Egypt.

*Historical note: It is thought that Jesus was born just before Herod the Great's death in 4 BC. Upon that death there were uprisings all over the Jewish homeland and some of them had clearly messianic overtones – violent attempts to replace an unjust and Rome appointed tyrant with a just and God-appointed ruler...according to Josephus's Jewish War, a rebel named Judas "raised a considerable body of followers, broke open the royal arsenals, and having armed his companions, attacked the other aspirants to power"(2.56)*

*The response from Rome was devastating. Varus sent two legions based in Syria, approximately 18000 elite troops, 2000 cavalry and 1500 auxiliary troops. Josephus does not say what happened in 4 BC but during the next rebellion in 67 AD in a similar response Lucius Annius "put to the sword a thousand of the youth, who had not already escaped, made prisoners of the women and children, gave his soldiers licence to plunder the property and set fire to the houses".*

## What is different in Matthew's Nativity story?

It is surprising how little of Matthew's nativity story involves Jesus. There is no journey to Bethlehem (they were already there), no revelation to Mary, no census, no shepherds and no trip to the temple, so no Simeon and Anna. Instead the story is about Joseph and his dilemma and on Herod's attempt to destroy Jesus. Jesus' birth is only mentioned in the last verse of the chapter where it is stated that he had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus".

*Spend a **short** time discussing why you think Matthew virtually excludes Mary and Jesus from his story*

## Final thoughts and comment

Matthew draws a parallel between the birth of Jesus and the birth of Moses in Exodus. In both cases an evil ruler plots to kill all the new-born males and thereby endangers the life of the predestined child who is only saved by divine intervention and heavenly protection. Anyone in the first century aware of scripture would have made that connection.

We know that Matthew's gospel was written for a Jewish audience steeped in scripture and prophetic fulfilment.

Is it a coincidence then that Matthew's story involves five dreams which reflect five prophetic scriptural fulfilments?

The dreams:

1. To Joseph – Mary's virginal conception
2. To the Wise Men – warning not to divulge Jesus' birthplace
3. To Joseph – flight to Egypt
4. To Joseph – return to Israel
5. To Joseph – warned about Herod's son, so went to Nazareth

The prophecies:

1. Isaiah 7.14 "a virgin shall conceive..."
2. Micah 5.2, "Bethlehem...for from you shall come a ruler"
3. Hos. 11.1 "Out of Egypt I have called my son"
4. Jeremiah 31.15 "A voice was heard in Ramah..."
5. Unknown "He will be called a Nazorean"

*Any final comments or observations about Matthew's Nativity story?*

Next time we will look at Luke's Nativity story and find a very different emphasis.

## **Closing Prayers**

God of gentleness and love

Draw near to us as we draw near to you

Dwell in every heart and conversation

Fashion in us the likeness of your Son Jesus Christ

Help us to discern together all that you are calling us to be

And all that you are calling us to do.

Assist us, by your Spirit to become a more contemplative, more compassionate  
and more courageous Church

For the building of your kingdom and the glory of your Son.

**Amen**

Almighty God,

whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life:

raise us, who trust in him,

from the death of sin to the life of righteousness,

that we may seek those things which are above,

where he reigns with you

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, world without end.

**Amen.**

## **The Lord's Prayer**

Let us bless the Lord

**Thanks be to God. Amen**