

Gospel Reflection Advent 4A

December 22, 2013

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. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But 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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',
which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus.

Reflection

This is such a familiar story – a wonderful story about faithfulness and trusting God. It shows Joseph as a gentle man whose ego did not overwhelm his choices. But what does it actually have to say to us who are not likely to find ourselves in Joseph's position? Or are we? Of course we're not going to find ourselves engaged to an inexplicably pregnant virgin, but . . .

We've all had to make tough decisions when the identification of the right and wrong choices were far from clear. Joseph was certainly in that situation. According to the strictest letter of the Law of Moses, his choice was clear. His fiancée was with child and he knew he hadn't had anything to do with it. She should be publically disgraced and perhaps even stoned to death. Yet he chose not to act out of his wounded feelings, his legitimate sense of betrayal. He chose to act with generosity and compassion, even in the face of her telling him an unbelievable tale that no sane person could swallow. He couldn't marry her, of course, but he would find a way to protect her from what he saw as the consequences of her choices.

Then he had a dream. There is a long tradition in Scripture of people having life-changing dreams – of hearing from God in their dreams. Some dreams can seem so real that it's hard to distinguish them from the really real. So how was Joseph to decide? His choice was on the side of accepting a difficult, improbable, costly vocation, which also meant sticking his neck way out. People can count. They know the difference between a premature baby and one for whose early birth there is no reasonable explanation except the obvious. He chose to bear the label of a betrayed man in a culture where that identity is a source of deep shame; loss of personal honor beyond what we can conceive. Long before Jesus was dragging his cross to his execution, his step-father also chose to bear the weight of compassionless judgment.

This story is partly about hard choices; choices beyond the obvious. It speaks of willingness to go far past the extra mile because prayer and discernment point toward a more difficult choice: the right, the compassionate, regardless of cost. It speaks about letting go of ego, of genuine, justified hurt in order to make life-giving choices.

Perhaps a question to take from this story of Joseph and his choices is how we are given opportunities to choose to enable Christ to be born in our time and circumstances. Or perhaps it's simply about how willing we are to step back from even the most legitimate of anger and hurt feelings in order to look for the more loving and compassionate choice; the choice that heals and brings life.