

Advent Study series 2020

Session 2

An angel of God encounters Joseph – God Instructs

Matthew 1:18-25



We turn to Matthew's gospel for this session because Matthew tells us more about Joseph than any other gospel writer. All Luke tells us of Joseph before Jesus' birth is that "Mary was engaged to a man called Joseph, of the House of David" (Lk 1:27) and there is even less from John and Mark. (After a mystical opening about the Word made flesh, John, like Mark, plunges straight into his gospel with a focus on John the Baptist.)

Read Matthew 1:18-25

Make a note of any comments or questions that immediately come to mind and if you wish, share these with others now or later.

Last session we thought about insights from scripture, history and tradition and what they give us to fill in the background to the characters in the encounter. We won't do that for the nameless angel here! But what do we know about Joseph, famous only for his supporting role in the drama of the nativity?

Joseph ...

What do we learn about Joseph - his character, his relationship with God - from this passage?

Joseph is set on not doing the wrong thing (marrying Mary) but kind enough to want to spare her publicly disgrace... (According to the religious and cultural norms of the time, "betrothal" was as binding as marriage and once Mary's condition was known, she would have risked being stoned.)

What has been your experience of making difficult decisions? Where was God in the process?

This encounter is in "dream time" rather than "real time" and God's message is instruction rather than request - but Joseph's response is as obedient as Mary's. Joseph "did as the Lord commanded him." So here we have a righteous man, kind, thoughtful and considerate; a good Jew, obedient to God.

An angel (the same angel? A different one?) appears to Joseph a second time, after Jesus is born, again with instruction - Get yourself, the child and his mother to Egypt as fast as you can, King Herod is looking for the child (Matt 1:13 – 15) and later for a third time, to tell Joseph it is now safe to go back to the Galilee. (Matt 2:19)

And that's about it for Joseph, as far as the gospel writers are concerned. Because of the age factor and life expectancy, we presume he died before Jesus began his public ministry but when and where and what family he left, we are not told. However, we do know he was of the House of David.

...of the House of David

In contrast to the gospel writers lack of interest in Mary's lineage, Matthew starts his gospel with an exhaustive list that used to be known as "the begatteries" in the days when the King James version of the Bible was the one used. ('Abraham begat Isaac who begat Jacob...' and so on... and on... and on!). This is possibly one of the most boring passages in scripture and in the introduction to his commentary on Matthew's gospel the theologian Benedict Viviano writes that "seldom has such an important book begun in such a repellent way..."!

But it was a common way in the writing of the ancient Near East.

Convention aside, why do you think Matthew began in this way?

Let's look now at what we can learn of **Joseph from Apocryphal writing, history and tradition.**

The standard image of Joseph is of a man well past his youth, wielding carpenters tools in a humble workshop. This could well be accurate in terms of Joseph's age but in other respects it may be wide of the mark.

Based on Jewish tradition, Joseph has always been assumed to have been appreciably older than Mary, and if this was so, given the culture of the day, it is highly likely that he had been married before and was a widower, almost certainly already a father.

Origen (a late C2nd Christian scholar from Alexandria, with access to oral tradition and documents lost to us now), claimed that Joseph had sons (probably daughters too but these do not merit a mention!) from a previous marriage. This is supported by the C2nd apocryphal Gospel of James, (also known as the Book / Protoevangelium of James) that says Joseph first refused to take Mary as his wife because he was so much older and already had sons. It also records Joseph's later words to Mary, that he will leave her in his house, while he goes away to build his buildings.

... And so to Joseph's trade and status.

Tradition claims that Joseph was a carpenter. This may well be true! However the Greek word for carpenter may equally be used to refer to an artisan of stone or metal and, given the abundance of stone in the region, it is entirely possible that Joseph was a stonemason. But whatever his raw material, in the culture of the day, Jesus would have been very familiar with Joseph's workshop, learning from his earthly father the craftsman's skills.

Whether working in stone or wood, the likelihood is that a man of Joseph's age was no humble craftsman but a master builder. In the first century there was a big building programme underway in the region, including a new palace for King Herod and the new town of Caesarea Maritima and master craftsmen would have been in high demand, coming to the region to work from a wide geographical area. This could explain why Joseph was (lodging?) in the nearby town of Nazareth, available to be approached by Mary's family on the lookout for a well set up husband for her...

So, along with what we know and have deduced for ourselves from scripture, holding (or casting aside!) pointers from history and tradition, let's think about the encounter between the angel of God and Joseph...

These last few weeks have not been easy, one way and another. I had my doubts from the beginning, when her family first approached me with the proposition that I take Mary as my second wife. I knew this was the thing for a widower to do and her father was keen... but my children were past the stage when they needed a mother and all my sadness at losing my precious Miriam welled up again. Could I really be a good husband a second time? And to this young girl? But I did agree. I saw the positives! Our engagement was announced and the wedding was imminent.

And then the bombshell! Mary – that shy, apparently God-fearing Mary, about whom no-one has a bad word to say, good family and all – told me she was ... I struggle to say it... with child! With child! And I was most emphatically NOT the father.

I agonised about what to do. The marriage was definitely off but should I dismiss her quietly or publicly shame her? If I made this matter public, in this community, she would probably be stoned . Could I live with that?

The days were so busy, not only with my own work but overseeing the youngsters drafted in for the less important elements of the building project – Herod was, as you would expect, very demanding – that there was no time to think. And once I went to bed, sleep was impossible with everything going round in my head ...

...It's funny how Joseph claimed to find it impossible to sleep when I was charged by God to appear to him in a dream. But then, mortals are funny if you ask me. And God often chooses to communicate with them this way... So I duly appeared to Joseph and hoped he would hear, understand and remember God's message, sleeping or not...

I suppose I was just so exhausted that night that I did fall asleep – and dreamed. I had the most extraordinary dream! So vivid! So clear! An angel came to me and spoke my name and told me to take Mary as my wife and why.

Did I say it was extraordinary?

It was as if I was awake all the time and I really HAD seen an angel.

But I must have been asleep because it was dark when I went to bed and the next thing I knew was that daylight filled the room.

And I woke up knowing two things: one that this was a dream I would NEVER forget and two, that I had to go ahead with the marriage. I got up and went to see Mary...

Why do you think God chose to communicate with Joseph in a dream?

There are examples of God communicating to people in dreams throughout scripture, especially in the Old Testament.

Before you look below can you think of any?

Here are some famous examples of God using the medium of dreams to communicate, from the Old Testament records of the ancient Israelites - **Jacob**, Genesis 28:10 – 15 / **Laban**, Gen 31 :24 / **Joseph**, Gen 37 :5-11 / **Pharaoh**, Gen 41:1-18 / **Solomon**, 1 Kings 3:5-15 / **Nebuchadnezzar**, Daniel 2:1-47

Numbers 12:6 and **Jeremiah 23:23-32** imply that it is relatively common for someone to claim God spoke to them in a dream.

The Numbers reference suggests God speaks to prophets (Note that this does not

state God only speaks to recognised or 'professional' prophets in this way), while in the passage from Jeremiah, prophets are condemned for falsely claiming God spoke to them in dreams.

God's voice being heard in dreams is noted in the New Testament too (think of Pilate's wife in **Matthew 27:19** or **Ananias, Acts 9:10-16**) but this form of communication seems far less frequent than in the Old Testament.

Why might this be so?

So... Does God still speak to people in dreams? Share any experience you have had (or heard about).

How much reliance did you/ would you place on a message you thought God had given you in this way?

How do we distinguish between dreams and visions? Does the distinction matter?

And back to Joseph!

Part 1 of God's nativity plan relied on Mary saying "yes" to God. But there is no suggestion here that Joseph was given a choice.

Why might God instruct rather than request Joseph to marry Mary?.

Why do you think God sometimes makes requests of us and at other times instructs us? Where do we find the instruction? How do we tell the difference?

Finally, in worship

Remembering that worship is coming before God in reverence and adoration, take some time to realise that you are in God's presence.

Remembering who God is, with silence ... music... visual art... poetry, offer praise

Think what have you heard from God this session.

Offer praise and thanksgiving for God's love and care for you, that at times is shown in God requesting something of you, at other times in God's instruction.

And ask yourself,

How is God communicating with me this Advent? Is any of this instruction? What is my response?