

## Fourth Sunday of Advent Year A [2010]

The story of Jesus' birth in Matthew 1:18-25 should be read as a continuation of the genealogy that comes immediately before these verses. This genealogy is extremely important as it establishes Jesus to be the Son of David through his legal father Joseph. The birth story however explains how Jesus was the Son of God conceived through the Holy Spirit. But to appreciate this birth story one must first have some basic understanding of Jewish marriage laws and customs and the way the divine is thought to communicate through angels and dreams plus the use of biblical quotations in Matthew's Gospel.

Jews of Jesus' time understood marriage more in terms of a civil contract than a religious ritual. Betrothal was taken very seriously with legal consequences (see Deut 20:7; 22:23-27). It was usually arranged through the elders of the family when the males were at least thirteen and the females just twelve. Apart from the forbidden degrees of kinship (see Leviticus 18) it was usual to marry within tribes or families. The betrothal took place at the home of the father of the bride where she stayed after the betrothal. There could be several years between the betrothal and the marriage ceremony which consisted of the bride moving to the groom's home or to that of his father. So when we read Matthew 1:18- 25 we know that this betrothal had already taken place.

At the first sight, Mary's pregnancy involves a betrothed virgin who had sexual relations with another man, in which case the man is guilty of "violating his neighbour's wife" (Deut. 22:24) which would carry the death penalty. Now Joseph had the choice to carry out the punishment or to simply carry out the divorce procedure which meant that a written notice signed by 2 witnesses was handed over. His decision according to the Gospel was not to apply the strict demands covered by Deuteronomy 22:23-27. But Joseph's decision was cut short through a dream from a messenger called an "angel of the Lord"

(See Gen16:7-13 and several other instances in the Hebrew Scriptures of such a messenger).

At the centre of our Gospel text is the angel's announcement to Joseph regarding Jesus' birth, name and identity. The angel's proclamation in Matt1:20-21 follows a pattern developed in the OT with respect to the birth of a son. The announcement begins with the word "behold" the designation of the child's name and the specification of the child's identity. The story of the announcement of Jesus' birth is accompanied by the first of many "fulfilment quotations" in Matthew (see 1:23; 2:5, 15, 17,23; 3:3; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14,35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9). They are the evangelist's way for underlining the continuity between the ancient biblical tradition and the events of Jesus' life. But this notion of fulfilment should not be taken to imply the end of the OT tradition. For Matthew and his community, for whom he is writing, the tradition retained its significance yet found its fullness in the person of Jesus.

### Questions for further thought or discussion

1. List the obstacles God encountered as he brought Jesus into the world. Is anything obstacle-free? How can good come out of obstacles? Do you turn to God more often with problems or with joy?
2. "El" was an ancient word for God. It was used in the Hebrew name, Immanu'el, which meant literally, "God is with us." What does "Emmanuel" say to you about your life now?

3. Today we see the importance of Jesus' ancestry at the time of his birth. Think about your own ancestry and give thanks for those ancestors who have had some share in bringing you where you are today. What importance do you think one's ancestry has in their life?

