

Encounter with Jesus – Joseph

In these services we are looking at people who have had an encounter with Jesus and the effect the encounter had on them. As we are in Advent we looked last time at Mary, the mother of Jesus and tonight we are going to look at Joseph. Again we'll take a broader view than just one encounter, looking at his relationship with Jesus throughout his life.

There are numerous mentions of Joseph in the gospels. I have chosen 3 sets of readings to look at different aspects of Joseph's experiences and character.

Part 1 – Annunciation and birth. Hilary is going to read us the first part of his story. [Mt 1:18-25](#), [Lk 2:4-7](#), [Lk 2:21-33](#).

Luke's account of Mary's encounter with the angel tells us she "hurried" to Elizabeth's home as they were related and the angel had told her Elizabeth was 6 months pregnant. Mary stayed there 3 months, so returned to Nazareth just before or when John was born. The reading tonight tells us Mary was "found to be with child", which could be when she returned and it was obvious or when she told Joseph. Whichever it was his first reaction was to assume she had been unfaithful and to divorce her.

This may seem strange to us because they were only betrothed, not married – so surely he could just break off the engagement. However betrothal in NT times was more binding than engagements are today and was normally accompanied by the groom's payment of at least part of the bride price (dowry). It commonly lasted a year and meant that bride and groom were officially pledged to each other but had not yet consummated the marriage; advances toward anyone else were thus regarded as adulterous. (Betrothals were so binding that if a woman's fiancé died, she was considered a widow; betrothals could otherwise be terminated only by divorce.) The penalty for adultery under Old Testament law was death by stoning, and this penalty applied to infidelity during betrothal as well. However by this time the death penalty was rarely if ever executed for this offense and Joseph would have merely been required to divorce Mary and expose her to shame. But a woman with a child, divorced for such infidelity, would be hard pressed ever to find another husband, leaving her without means of support if her parents died. However because divorces could be effected by a simple document with two witnesses, Joseph could have divorced her without making her shame more widely known, which is what is stated in the reading. We are told this was because he was a righteous man, but it also a good indication that he was a considerate and caring man even before he has the first dream.

In the Old Testament, angels often brought messages in dreams. The name Jesus means "God is salvation" in Hebrew. Parents often intended the names they gave children to have some meaning, but if God gave the name, it had special significance. The Old Testament taught that God's people would be saved in the time of the Messiah, and Jewish readers in the first century would have understood this salvation to mean more than just personal forgiveness. They prayed for the day when God would deliver his people from the consequences of their sins - from subjugation beneath their enemies; many believed that this deliverance would occur when their people as a whole reformed and turned wholeheartedly to God. Jesus came to deliver his people from personal sin and thus to deliver them from its judgment as well.

Joseph acts like Old Testament men and women of God who obeyed God's call even when it went against all human common sense. Marriage consisted of covenant (the betrothal), a ceremony and consummation, which ratified the marriage, normally on the first night of the seven-day wedding. Joseph here takes Mary home as his wife but abstains from consummating the marriage until after Jesus is born, so technically they were still not married.

As we saw last time, Joseph is courageous to take his pregnant betrothed with him back to Bethlehem where he would have had relatives, but Joseph may simply have wished to avoid leaving her alone this late in her pregnancy, especially if the circumstances had deprived her of other friends.

Joseph and Mary fulfil the requirements for her purification after 33 days in Lev 12. Simeon's praise reflects the previous words Mary, Joseph and the shepherds had received, so this is the third time Joseph has been told Jesus will be the Messiah by angelic messages. Note how there has already been a lot of fulfilment of prophesy in the first month or so of Jesus' life.

Hilary is going to read the second part of his story.

Part 2 – The Magi and the second and third dreams. [Mt 2:13-23](#).

Joseph is warned in a second dream of the threat to Jesus' life from Herod and obeys the message and flees to Egypt. Although this account in Matthew is the only record of this massacre, Herod was known for acts like it, he had three of his sons and one of his wives killed. As Bethlehem was not a large town the number of boys killed would not have been huge, which probably explains why it was not recorded by historians. A very large Jewish community lived in Egypt in this period. Perhaps one-third of Alexandria, located in northern Egypt, was Jewish; with a population estimated at about one million, it was one of the empire's largest cities and they would have been able to integrate into the Jewish community. Egypt had served as a place of refuge in the past ([1Ki 11:40](#); [Jer 26:21](#)). By leaving "at night," Joseph's family made their route of departure impossible to trace; the language might also evoke Jewish readers' memory of [Exo 12:31](#), when Pharaoh told Moses and the Israelites to leave in the middle of the night.

Matthew wrote his gospel aimed mainly at Jewish readers, so he builds almost every paragraph from Chap 1 to Chap 5 around at least one text in the Old Testament, explaining some event of Jesus' life from Scripture. He may have borrowed this Israel/Messiah analogy from Isaiah; Isaiah 42–53 narrows down the mission of Israel as a whole to the one who can ultimately fulfil that mission and suffer on behalf of the whole people - the one whom Christians would later understand to be Jesus.

When Herod died Augustus divided his kingdom among three of his sons, as was called for by Herod's will. Herod's son [Herod Archelaus](#) became ruler of Judea, [Samaria](#), and [Idumea](#) until 6 A.D., referred to as the [tetrarchy of Judea](#). However, Augustus then judged Archelaus to be incompetent, removing him from power and combining the same provinces into [Iudaea province](#) under rule of a Roman [prefect](#) (Pontius Pilate at the time of Jesus) until 41 A.D. As to Herod's other sons, [Herod Antipas](#) became the tetrarch of [Galilee](#) and [Peraea](#) from Herod's death to 39 A.D. and [Philip](#) became tetrarch of territories north and east of the Jordan.

Joseph receives a third dream from an angel telling him that it was now safe to return to Israel, but obviously didn't trust Archelaus and went to live in the territory controlled by Herod Antipas and where he had been living before the birth according to Luke.

Hilary is going to read the third part of his story.

Part 3 – Jesus' Coming of Age. [Lk 2:41-52](#).

The event recorded here is when Jesus is 12, the age at which he became a man in Jewish society. The verses just before these say that Joseph and Mary went every year to the Feast of Passover and they took their children. Jews were required to attend the Passover in Jerusalem at least once in their life, but if they could make the journey reasonably easily they would do so as often as possible. This year Jesus stays behind in the Temple when they leave, but they don't notice he is not with the party until the evening. They return to search for him and it says they found him after 3 days, probably very frantic and frightening days. He was amazing everyone with his understanding, but when Mary asks him why he treated them like this he replies "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?", which seems like a bit of a rebuke – but when you think about what Mary and Joseph had been told about him before and at his birth they should have understood but didn't. Then he goes to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them and for the second time we are told "his mother treasured all these things in her heart."

I find it interesting that this is the last time Joseph is mentioned, it is assumed he died before Jesus started his ministry, but it is at the point when Jesus became a man in Jewish society and did not need an earthly father to be responsible for him (cf the blind man in [Joh 9:21](#), his father says "Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.") The task God had given him to be the earthly father and protector of Jesus until he had grown up had been completed. Joseph also taught Jesus his carpenter's skills as Jesus is referred to as "the carpenter" in Mk 6:3 when he is in his home town of Nazareth.

Discussion – There are some questions for us here which I would like you to discuss in your groups and we'll then have a short feedback from each group:

Do you feel that God has ever spoken to you in a special way – dreams, visions, words from scripture, prophecies etc.?

How have you responded to them? Have you acted on them as Joseph did?