

The hero of St Matthew's Infancy Narrative (chapters 1 and 2) is, of course, Joseph. That's not strictly true because it is God who emerges from the stories in Matthew's Gospel, from first page to last, as the instigator behind all that is done and all that is said. From beginning to end, what we see is God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. God's intentions are realized everywhere, overcoming all opposition and inspiring all who listen and learn. Listen carefully and you will realize that it is the mind of the Father which orchestrates and directs what happens:

Now the origin of Jesus Messiah was in this way: His mother Mary while betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. But her husband Joseph, being a just man, and not wishing to expose her, decided to divorce her discretely. But when he had deliberated on these matters, behold! an angel of the LORD appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for that which is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will indeed bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins."

In Matthew's opening pages, the story concentrates on Joseph, the just man, Joseph the dreamer. He is the betrothed husband of Mary, but before they have consummated their love, she is discovered to be pregnant. We the hearers and readers of the story, have been told that the child has come from God, that the Holy Spirit has brought about this conception. Just as the Spirit of God, the

creative power of God, hovered at the moment of the creation of the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1-2), so now, at this new creation, it is the Holy Spirit who brings into being the child in Mary's womb. But there is that ambiguous phrase "she was found to be pregnant". Found by whom? By suspicious neighbours? By distraught parents of Joseph and Mary? By Joseph? What we can be sure of is that if Mary is guilty of adultery (for her betrothal binds her to all that marriage vows imply), then divorce and punishment are inevitable). But Joseph is an honorable man, a just man, a righteous man before God and his thoughtful deliberation leads him to dismiss her quietly, to spare her from the Law's demands and from public condemnation.

Or is there another explanation? Suppose this honourable man believed his young wife and came to understand that she was innocent of all crime and that, indeed, her child was of the Holy Spirit? Suppose that he, a righteous man before God, feared to take Mary as his wife precisely because he was afraid to enter into the very holiness of God's design. Suppose his deliberation led him to see that he was not worthy to undertake such an awesome calling? That is a possible explanation of his hesitancy to embrace God's design. But Matthew's sparse text suggests to me that Joseph was convinced of Mary's infidelity yet sparing in his condemnation and reluctant to expose her to the consequences of her adultery. He had not yet discerned the mind of God.

Matthew's Joseph is modeled on another Joseph in our Bible, the Joseph known to the world of stage and screen as the possessor of an amazing technicolour dream coat. His story is told in the Book of Genesis, taking up over a quarter of that long book (chapters 35 to 50). Joseph is the first son of the beautiful Rachael, a wife passionately loved by Jacob but who conceived with great difficulty. She bore Joseph and in bearing her second child, Benjamin, she died in Bethlehem and was buried there. The Bible says that Rachel's tomb "is there to this day", and, indeed it is.

The first children born in the Bible are Cain and Abel and Cain killed his brother, denying his criminal responsibility before God and before all who read his story: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9). Throughout the often gruesome stories of violence, betrayal, and bitter family dissensions which make up much of the Book of Genesis, Joseph emerges at the end to declare, “I am your brother Joseph”. Thus Cain’s question answered by the man whose life was guided by God: “The LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love, and gave him favour” (Genesis 39:21). And, of course, he was the great interpreter of dreams for he knew that “interpretations belong to God” (Genesis 40:8). For Joseph believed that God spoke in dreams and it was possible to understand them if one read them in God’s light, if he tried to discern God in his dreams. And we all know the song: Any Dream Will Do, as long as it’s from God. Joseph asks his brothers a question: “Am I in the place of God?” (Genesis 50:19). It is a rhetorical question. Indeed, he is in the place of God, for he sought to do good, to save the world from perishing in seven years of famine, and to save his own family from its devious and destructive sins. A truly just man, Joseph speaks to us of God in our world. To live his dreams is to live by God’s good guidance. The ancient Joseph saved his family, cared for them, and gave them the future God intended.

And that is who we meet in Joseph, the husband of Mary. Joseph will, says God, have a family to look after and Joseph the just and righteous man, listens and understands, and takes Mary to wife. God calls on Joseph to name the child, that is, to take him as his own, not simply as an adopted son, for in the customs of his people, to name a child is to say “This is my child”. Joseph’s dream reveals to him the true identity of the child Mary carried and he bowed before God’s holy will.

Joseph O’Hanlon

OGF