

## **The Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Eve, A ✕ D 2009**

### **Matthew 1:18-25**

*In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

1 Merry Christmas, Joseph. Descended from the kings of Judah, Joseph isn't a nobody. But he's not quite somebody, either, as he and his pregnant bride cannot find lodging in the hearth of the house, but must lay their newborn baby in the front room in a manger. In the Western Church, St. Joseph's feast day is on March 19, often overshadowed by the carousing and debauchery somehow supposed to celebrate the life of the missionary to Ireland, St. Patrick.

2 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Betrothal was tantamount to marriage, except that the marriage had not been consummated, legally or sexually. And one day, Mary disclosed to Joseph that she was expecting. Not only was the baby not his—which they both obviously knew—but the baby was not conceived by any man. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, she told him. And so Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling publicly to shame his betrothed, and unwilling to have her stoned to death for adultery, resolved to divorce her quietly. Although he had been wronged, it seemed, he would not return the favor and expose Mary to shame or punishment. It was a noble thing to do.

3 As Joseph was considering these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Her love for you is as her virginity, Joseph, pure and intact. She will give birth to a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. Joseph submits. His firstborn will not be his; staying with Mary, marrying her, means raising a Son that is not quite his. His betrothed will never be completely his either, impregnated by God, bearing in her womb the Son of God, the Incarnate Word of God. But Joseph submits. As such, he is a model for all Christians.

4 For nine months, the tongues will wag and the gossipers will gather, whispering about this man Joseph, too weak to keep his betrothed from Another's embrace. As the boy Jesus grew, Joseph would have to put up with the continual sneers of wicked men, and the ongoing labeling of his Son, the Son of God, as a bastard. He believed the story about the virgin conception. He witnessed the virgin birth. He watched as shepherds gathered around the Baby on the evening of His birth, heard their recounting the song of the angels. Joseph was the man the Lord employed to protect the infant Savior of the World. The dragon, the devil, sought to kill this Baby, which he did by sending Herod's soldiers into humble Bethlehem, brandishing swords, leaving every male child two years and younger dead. But Joseph saved the Savior, ushered his family into safety in Egypt. When Herod died, when the threat was over, Joseph brought them back to Nazareth. The war raged, unseen to human eyes, but the devil sought to kill Joseph's son. But Joseph the demon-fighter was unwavering in the face of such danger. He was not in the Lord's employ to save himself but to protect his foster Son, the Son of God.

5 Husbands, learn from Joseph, who endured limitless shame and scorn to protect his bride, how to love your wives. Fathers, learn from Joseph, who raised the Son of God, how to raise your sons to be godly men. Sons, learn from Joseph what true manliness is. Christians, learn from St. Joseph to endure the shame and humiliation that accompanies belief in an infant Savior born to die for your sins. Who first called the Son of God by the name Jesus, the name that declares He will save His people from their sins? Joseph. Who instructed the Incarnate Word of God in the Scriptures? Who made Him learn by heart the verses He would rattle off when tempted by the devil in the wilderness? Joseph. Who taught the Son of God how to pray to God the Father? Who showed the One who would often retreat by Himself to pray how to fold His divine hands and bend His holy knees? Joseph. Who brought to the temple the One who would eventually call Himself the Temple? Joseph. Who taught the value of hard work to the one through whom everything was created? Joseph. By the time Jesus began His ministry, Joseph seems to have died. At his funeral, you can imagine that those who gathered still snickered and sneered. Joseph had no personal gain to show for it, but he raised the Savior of the World.

6 Learn from Joseph. Fatherhood is more important than yourself. Being a faithful husband is more important than any worldly success. Be willing to endure the world's scorn and shame for believing in a virgin conception and virgin birth. Be willing to believe the unbelievable, to endure humiliation, both public and private. Joseph stays, refuses to flee when the going gets tough, stays—at great personal cost—for the sake of his bride and the child entrusted to his fatherly care. Learn from this father the value of evangelizing and catechizing your children, teaching both by example and by instruction. Nothing righteous is easy, and it usually comes at a greater cost than profit.

7 The most important thing you can learn from Joseph is this: learn to call this Son of Mary and the Son of God Jesus, who saves you from your sins. She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. Joseph's firstborn is not his own, but Joseph is his Firstborn's; He will save His people from their sins, among whom Joseph is included. This baby whom Joseph rocked when he fussed, whose diapers the day-laborer from Nazareth changed when they were soiled, whose birth was both quite miraculous and quite ordinary, was born to save His people from their sins. Joseph's sins, your sins, the sins of every lazy father, unfaithful husband, wicked wife, hot-tempered mother, disobedient child, every proud Christian who prides himself in being in church every week and every lazy Christian who spends 51 weeks a year rejecting God's gifts, every rebellious teenager, every worker who steals his boss' time, every murderer and everyone angry, everyone who cheats on his taxes or on his wife, everyone who breaks the speed limit or her promises, each and every sinner. Jesus saves His people from their sins.

8 To call this baby born to die Jesus is to confess that you cannot save yourself from your sins. His birth for you, His life for you, His death for you, His resurrection for you: these make Christmas merry. To celebrate Christmas, to sing carols, is to confess that without this Jesus who saves His people from their sins, you'd be eternally damned. Merry Christmas, Joseph; this Baby is born to save you from your sins. Merry Christmas, beloved; this Infant in a manger grew up to die on the cross for you.

9 Did Joseph have doubts? Did he struggle to believe that this Son was really the Son of God? Did he ever regret the decision not to divorce Mary quietly? Did he wish for a wife who

was completely his, children who were his own, a life his own? Probably. Doubtless, he struggled with these and any number of sins. That's why the Baby was born. Not to teach you how to save yourself from your sins, but to save you from your sins. To take them all upon Himself and die for them. All of them.

10      Doubt and struggle aren't inherently sinful. But they can lead to sin. So the Jesus born to save His people from their sins, born to save you from your sins, does that even today. The same Body laid in a manger is placed into your mouth today. The same Blood that dripped from His nail and spear wounds is poured down your throat today. Here, where He has promised to be—and nowhere of your own choosing—at His altar and nowhere else—is the salvation from your sins Jesus came to deliver. Because you are an imperfect father, Jesus has given you His Father. Because you are a wicked child, a faithless parent, Jesus has made you a child of God and given you new parentage. Because you are an unfaithful spouse, Jesus makes you part of His Bride, the Church. Because you were only an heir to death and Sin, Jesus has made you His brother or sister, made you co-heirs with Him of eternal life, having adopted you in Holy Baptism. You have a new Father, God the Father, and a new Brother, God the Son, and a new source of life, God the Holy Spirit. Merry Christmas, Joseph.

*In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

Pastor Jeff Hemmer

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