

JESUS CHRIST RECEIVED INTO THE HOUSE OF DAVID

“When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus”.

(Matthew 1: 24, 25)

We turn now to a passage from the Gospel according to Matthew, a Gospel which has aptly been called “the royal Gospel.” For Matthew’s purpose is to proclaim Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Son of David, the seed of Abraham. Matthew wants to demonstrate very clearly that God has fulfilled the prophecies of old in Jesus the Christ.

In our text Matthew establishes the *legitimacy* of Jesus. That is, he shows that Jesus lawfully, according to the Scriptures, takes the place assigned to Him as the Messiah. Matthew was writing first of all for the Jews in Palestine, and it was very important to convince these Jews that Jesus was truly and lawfully the Christ, Son of David, seed of Abraham.

This is why we have in Matthew 1: 1-17 the famous genealogy or list of names. Here is also the reason why in Matthew’s account *Joseph* receives such a prominent place. While Luke devotes more space to Mary and to her experiences, Matthew concentrates on Joseph and his role in the birth of the Lord.

Joseph and Mary each have their own place and task in the history of revelation. Most often attention is concentrated on Mary, and on what she has done. We know that she has become the object even of idolatry. Usually Joseph is left somewhere in the background, as if he had little or nothing to do with the birth of Christ.

It is of course true that neither Joseph nor Mary must stand in the centre of attention. They are only serving their God and ministering unto their Lord. It is Christ who must receive all attention.

But it remains true that Joseph has an important task to fulfill. As husband of Mary and as head of the royal house of David, Joseph must officially receive Mary’s child as his own, into his family. Joseph must do so *prophetically*, giving to the child the designation which God Himself has determined.

We may see God’s wonderful providence in leading all things in such a way that Jesus Christ takes His lawful place on earth and so becomes our Saviour, our Emmanuel. For that is the true joy of Christmas. And in that context we may and must pay attention to the work of Joseph with respect to the birth of Christ. Through this work, Jesus Christ is officially received into His earthly family, the house of David. This is done in submission to God’s Word, in recognition of God’s holiness, and in confession of God’s grace.

JOSEPH’S PROBLEM

We can fully understand that Joseph has a problem when he hears that Mary, his betrothed, is pregnant and will have a child which is not his child. This is not a fairy tale, but real life, and Joseph has to deal with a very complicated situation.

Most explainers feel that Joseph believes that Mary has been untrue to him, and that he therefore wants to divorce her (verse 19). The procedure of divorce, as regulated in the Law of Moses, required a public ceremony. But, we are told, Joseph was considering to divorce her “quietly,” because he was “unwilling to put

her to shame.” The explainers say that Joseph loved Mary too much to make a public spectacle out of her; he was too kind and compassionate a man.

But it does not say anywhere that Joseph did not believe Mary’s account and that he suspected unfaithfulness. Mary will have told him exactly what happened. Joseph will also have heard about what happened to Zechariah and Elizabeth, as described in Luke 1. Joseph himself expected the coming of the Messiah, and there is no reason why he should disbelieve Mary. He knew of the wondrous works and almighty power of God.

STEPPING BACK?

Being a “just man,” that is a God-fearing man, Joseph simply does not know what to do. He recognizes that God has claimed Mary for an important and unique task. He obviously feels that he must now step back. He thinks that he cannot play a role here anymore. Their relationship will have to be terminated, but how?

Since Mary is not guilty of adultery, he does not want to cast even a shadow of suspicion on her. So he considers that he’ll have to do it quietly, without public ceremony.

Joseph is prepared to let Mary go, now that God has a special purpose for her. This will have been difficult for him, but he does not see anymore how their marriage can function. We read in verse 20 that the angel says to him, “. . . do not fear to take Mary your wife.” Do not *fear*, which indicates that Joseph’s fear was a fear of the Lord. For whom else should Joseph fear? A verb is used here that is also used for fearing the Lord. Joseph will step aside in wonder, awe, and reverent fear.

So Joseph is pondering the question: how do I end this relationship without bringing any shame to Mary? We can imagine him, at night, tossing and turning in a restless sleep, after having considered all the angles and not having found a solution. In that situation, an angel appears to him in a dream.

And what the angel does is simply tell Joseph what his task is in all this. He is addressed very honourably as “Joseph, son of David” (verse 20). He need not out of fear step back. God does not at all want this relationship terminated. Instead, He wants the marriage to be solemnized.

It is true that Mary’s child is “of the Holy Spirit,” and that Joseph has no task here as a natural father. But he does have another task: to receive this child into his family, and to recognize it in earthly terms as his own child. Joseph will have to function as the earthly father of the child. He will have to give it a legitimate place and an official name.

A CONVINCING DREAM

We read, “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. . . .” Joseph vividly recalled the essential elements of the dream. What is more, he recognized the contents of the dream as being the Word of God.

We might not let ourselves be so quickly convinced by such a dream. After all, in

our view dreams are deceptive. We would wonder and say: did I really dream that? Does God really require this of me? But we must understand that God did not reveal Himself in the same way then as He does now. Joseph was quite aware that a dream could contain divine revelation. And he accepted this dream because it also accorded with the facts that he had witnessed. In doing so, Joseph submitted to the Word of God.

We can speak with admiration about Mary, who so willingly says to the angel, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1: 38). But Joseph is no less obedient; he shows himself to be a true son of David, also according to the Spirit, for he too says, “Behold, I am the hand-servant of the Lord; I will do according to your word.”

Nor does he waste any time. Now that he knows his task, he makes haste to fulfill it. The very next day, “when he awoke from sleep,” it says, he began to take the necessary measures and to prepare for the marriage. There could now be no delay. And this was not so much for the good name and reputation of Mary as for the sake of the name of the Christ. The glory of God is at stake here, more than the honour of men.

The name of this child must be without blemish. He must in His birth be legitimately received into His earthly family. He shall not be a child born out of wedlock, with no name and place of His own. He shall, instead, be known as the son of Joseph of Nazareth, the carpenter, who is lawfully the son of David.

From Luke 1 we get the impression that right after the appearance of the angel Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, and that she marries Joseph after her return from Elizabeth’s home. She stayed with Elizabeth for three months. So she may have been about three months pregnant when Joseph married her.

SUBMISSION TO THE WORD

Be that as it may, it is clear that Joseph wastes no time. We read, “He took his wife.” The next step to complete the marriage covenant is taken. The official wedding occurs, and Mary is now Joseph’s lawful wife. And the point is: when Joseph takes Mary as his wife, he also consciously accepts the child as the Son of God.

It is important for us to appreciate this. Joseph and Mary were not ignorant victims of God’s mysterious ways. See how open and frank the Scriptures speak about this matter. The man Joseph was not deceived, fooled, kept in the dark! He knew exactly what he was doing. He may not have understood all the implications and consequences, but he acted, in the knowledge he had, in sincere faith. We see here in the house of David the triumphant power of faith. We see what truly characterizes the house of David: submission to the Word of God.

Joseph and Mary did not do what they did in their own strength. They were prepared by the Word of God to act in simple and childlike faith. There is no other way for the Christ to be received in His earthly family than in the way of submission to the Word, the way of faith.

And in essence it is still the same today. Christ is now in heavenly glory and

does not need an earthly family to be born in. But we must receive Him in our families and homes, and in our lives as individuals, in the same faith as Joseph and Mary. Indeed, our faith must even be deeper, since it is based on a far greater knowledge than Joseph and Mary ever had. Joseph dreamed a special dream, but we have the entire revelation of God, so that we may know: this child is truly the Emmanuel, the Saviour of our lives, our joy today and our hope for eternity!

We should be amazed that the Son of God in this way will enter into our earthly situation, and we should understand Joseph's reverence for the *holiness of the Lord*.

GOD'S HOLINESS RESPECTED

Notice how it is emphatically stated that the marriage, although officially solemnized, is not in fact consummated, for it says, ". . . but [Joseph] knew her not until she had borne a son" (verse 25a). He "knew her not" means that he had no sexual relations with her.

This may surprise us. Since Joseph and Mary were now lawfully husband and wife, did Joseph not have the right to have these relations with his wife? We know today that such relations, with love and care, are not at all dangerous to the mother or the expected child until perhaps the last month of pregnancy. We do not read anywhere that the Lord had forbidden Joseph to have this relation with his wife. It could very well have been Joseph's own position in the matter.

We must appreciate that this cannot have been easy for the couple, especially not for Joseph. If Mary was two or three months pregnant when they married, it meant a wait of at least eight or nine months. These people had normal desires and needs, and we must understand, when we read this simple statement in our text, that it did mean a great sacrifice which could only be made by the power of faith.

What is the reason for Joseph's abstinence? It has to do with his being a God-fearing man, a man who indeed stands in awe of God's mighty work. It is inspired by nothing less than a great reverence for the holiness of the Lord.

Joseph knows that the child is conceived by the Holy Spirit. He realizes that the power of the most High has "overshadowed" Mary. She is in the special service of Lord at this time. It must remain absolutely clear that this child is not born in any way by the *power* or the *will of man*, but that it is indeed born of the Spirit.

The Jews in Matthew's time could have scoffed and said, "Jesus was probably just Joseph's natural son, conceived before marriage maybe, but still Joseph's natural son." Therefore, Matthew must explain: in no way can this child have been conceived by man, for there was no sexual union between Joseph and Mary "until she had borne a son."

Joseph abstains in recognition of the power of the Holy Spirit, in reverence of God's holiness. Here man must indeed step back. Here the work of God must first be completed. And it is written so that we today will know without any doubt: this child is conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the *virgin* Mary!

NO OTHER CHILDREN?

You probably know what the Roman Catholic church has done with this text. Rome contends that Joseph and Mary *never* had any sexual relations and that Mary remained a virgin mother until her death. How could the same womb which had borne the Holy Son of God also bring forth sinful children? And when the Bible speaks about Jesus' "brothers," Rome explains that these must have been children of Joseph from a previous marriage, not sons of Mary.

But our text does not require this explanation. If he knew her not *until* she had borne a son, it is to be understood that he *did* know her *after* this son was born, after the time of purification and healing had taken place. Joseph abstained not because Mary was so holy and even beatified (as Rome says), but because of the child, Jesus. In brief, we need not make this a complicated matter. The simplest and most logical explanation is usually the best. It was out of reverence for the holiness of God and the power of the Holy Spirit that Joseph knew: until the child is born, I must stand back, completely. So Joseph learned to reckon with the special character of this child before it was born. With how much awe will he have received this child into his family after it was born!

Christ was received with great reverence, even though He came by the way of the womb, was born of a woman, into the weakness of human flesh, in humility. How much more, then, shall He be received with reverence today, now that He has a glorified body and dwells in heavenly glory! Shall we not stand in awe of Him Who on Christmas became like unto us in every respect, except sin? Shall we not revere Him Who showed forth the holiness of God on our behalf in a corrupt and wicked world? And Who is coming with the clouds of heaven to judge the living and the dead?

GIVING A NAME

Joseph showed his reverence for the holiness of God, and for the holiness of the child conceived by the Spirit. He also confessed *God's grace* at the birth of this child. For the text continues, "and he called His Name Jesus." It was in Israel the father's official task to give a name to each child, and so to give that child a place in the family and in Israel.

We have to understand that when Joseph gave this name to the child, he was acting in obedience to the command of the angel of the Lord. Joseph may not have understood the deep implications of this name, as we do today. Still, being a just and devout man who expected salvation from God, he did understand that this was a very significant and special name. He knew that when he gave the child this name, he officially designated Him as the Saviour of Israel, as the promised Messiah.

The name "Jesus" – as the angel explained – means Saviour: "for He will save His people from their sins" (verse 21). When Joseph gives this name to the child, he does a prophetic deed. For the name Jesus is prophecy, proclamation from above,

concerning the purpose and the task of this child. All Israel will hear the prophetic claim which lies in this name.

The name Jesus, or Joshua in Hebrew, designated those who led Israel out of the house of bondage and into the land of promise. Here it means a spiritual liberation and renewal: deliverance by the blood and Spirit of Christ; salvation from sin and from death, the wages of sin.

When Joseph gives that name, he is not only the first *prophet* of the New Testament, but also the first *professor*. A professor is someone who makes an important declaration of faith. Joseph is the first one to present this child as the Saviour sent of God. He is the first to receive it publicly as a gift of God's grace, and the first to proclaim the appearance of God's grace to Israel in the birth of this child.

Whenever we read these Christmas stories, every year again, it should strike us how privileged these people must have felt, how unassuming they appeared, and how deeply they understood that God's unmerited and unexpected grace was manifesting itself in their lives through this child! God did something so wonderful and amazing in their lives through the child Jesus, that it never ceased to amaze them.

NO FRINGE PLAYER

Sometimes we tend to think that Joseph got a bad deal, that he was no more than a fringe-player at the manger of Bethlehem, upstaged by ecstatic shepherds and adoring wise men. But Joseph is prophet and professor of God's grace in Christ Jesus, and our confession today is based on his prophecy, which he received from God Himself: this child is our Saviour, our Redeemer. And in this manner Joseph, too, was used by God to put Christ in the centre.

In naming Jesus in humble confession of God's sovereign grace, Joseph proclaimed that all who want to be saved must embrace this child, this Son of David, as their Saviour. That is the prophetic claim which must be preached every Christmas morning again: there is salvation only in the Son of God. Let us then with the same wonder, recognizing God's awesome and amazing grace in Christ, say with even more conviction and insight than Joseph: He is truly our Saviour. Let us with this profession receive Him into our lives, into our homes, and say with all our heart, "Thou hast become, LORD, my salvation; all those who seek Thee wilt Thou bless."