

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we enter the Christmas season, it is good during these few remaining days of Advent to have the opportunity to reflect upon the deeper meaning of Christmas. To look behind the presents, the decorations, the parties and other celebrations, and really focus on what it is all about.

Our passage today, from Matthew's Gospel tells us with no frills attached what Christmas is all about.

It tells us the beginning of the story with no Christmas card gloss.

In fact one of the most striking things about this passage is its brutal honesty and the cold reality of the decision one man had to make when faced with God's amazing plan.

Yes, it may be a familiar story, and yet as we read these verses, we discover some of the most amazing truths.

Most nativity plays follow Luke's account of the birth of Jesus which is told from Mary's perspective.

But Matthew tells the story from Joseph's perspective and gives us some insights into the difficult decision that he had to make.

Having learned that Mary was expecting a child, should he go ahead with the marriage or should he divorce her quietly?

Within Jewish customs, a girl would often be pledged to be married to a boy from a very early age, and then when they reached marriageable age, they would get engaged. And in Jewish law, this engagement period, lasting about a year, was legally binding. The man and woman were called husband and wife, and yet they did not live together. After about a year's engagement, there would be a wedding ceremony lasting about seven days and the new bride would be taken to the groom's house where they would begin their fully authorised married life together.

It was understood too that there would be no marital relations between the couple before they got officially married and moved to live together. But if one of the couple was found to be unfaithful during this year's engagement period, then because the engagement was legally binding, a divorce was necessary.

We can imagine how Joseph must have felt when he discovered his wife-to-be was pregnant! Shocked and staggered to say the least.

It is at this point that God steps in. God reveals his plan by words as well as actions. And he reveals that the identity of this baby, is none other than God himself.

He reveals this news in two ways. Firstly by sending an angel to Joseph, in a dream – making it clear that God's Spirit is at work in all that is happening

Secondly, God also reveals the identity of this child through a prophecy. Matthew in presenting the Gospel message is meticulous in pointing out how these stories about Jesus fulfil prophecies made hundreds of years before. Here, he quotes from the prophet Isaiah: *'All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel which means God with us.'*

There is a story about a ruler of the Persian Empire a long time ago called Shah Abbas. He was a good ruler and he used frequently to get rid of all the trappings of royalty, the splendid clothing, his retinue of servants, just so he could walk around unrecognised amongst his people.

One cold night, he was doing his rounds and he went into the city walls to retreat from the chill because that was where the city's heating system was located. He struck up a conversation with the city's stoker, who was working away in that sweaty, grimy place. It never occurred to the stoker that this was the Shah. Well, he went back a number of times and they became firm friends; the stoker used to have him back to his family for simple meals of bread and water. Then one day the Shah revealed his identity to the amazement of his friend. And he said 'Look I'll give you anything you want'. But the stoker said in reply, 'You, Shah Abbas, may give to others, gifts of fame and fortune. I ask you never to take away your greatest gift: the friendship you have given me.'

Jesus laid aside his glory to come to us. And our natural question is, if God has gone so far for us, then why has he done it?

The answer comes in our Gospel passage this morning. Joseph is told *that 'Mary will give birth to a son, who he is to name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'*

Quite simply, God sends Jesus into the world to save. In the well known words of Jesus recorded in John's Gospel:

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

We are clearly told then, that Jesus will save people from their sins. And Joseph discovers this through the name the boy is to be given.

In the ancient world, names were far more significant than they are today. Today when parents are choosing the name of their child, it rarely has anything to do with what the name actually means. Usually it's because they like the name, or it has some family history. If they were to take a look at what the names mean, then they might think again!

For instance, if you call your son Andrew, it means he is manly,
or if you call your daughter Sarah, it means she is a princess.

Of course, names are not always so flattering in their meaning.

But for Joseph, the name of his son was very significant.

For Jesus meant 'God saves'.

His name reveals what Jesus has come to do.

He came to save his people from their sins.

Again this is something that had been prophesied for many years before. Although Matthew doesn't spell it out, he is echoing the psalmist who says: *'God himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.'*

In the Gospels, we see Jesus redeeming his people from their sins – breaking down every barrier that separates us from the will and love of God. Not only by giving us his teaching and an example on which to model our lives, but by giving his life on the cross for us.

One of the most popular carols sums up this gospel truth wonderfully – the last verse of hark the herald angels sing, goes like this:

Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace!

Hail the Sun of Righteousness!

Light and life to all he brings,

Risen with healing in his wings.

Mild he lays his glory by,

Born that we no more may die,

Born to raise the sons of earth,

Born to give them second birth.

Finally we come to think about Joseph's response to all of this.

Matthew tells us "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."

Joseph took the Lord at his word. He trusted in God. That can't have been easy for Joseph to do. He had been all set to divorce Mary.

But now he had to trust in the word of the Lord and do what God wanted. He trusted that what God had said was true. He believed it was possible for God to intervene in human history like this, and be born on earth as a child.

And so he gave Mary his full and loyal support as she took on the special role to which she had been called by God.

Joseph stands as a model to all of us when we are faced with difficult decisions.

Like Joseph we may not know exactly what the future holds, but like Joseph, if we really believe that God has acted in this way in human history, then we have no choice other than to trust him. For who else has the words of eternal life?

And so may our celebration of Christmas this coming week be an expression of thanks and praise to God for sending his Son to be Emmanuel, God with us;

And may we, modelling the faith and trust of both Mary and Joseph, through our words and actions reaffirm our willingness to say “Yes” to God’s will in our lives.

Amen.