

Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God –

2 the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures

3 regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David,

4 and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

5 Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake.

6 And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

7 To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew 1:18-25

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: his mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had **considered this/become angry**, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

22 All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet:

23 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us').

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Waiting well with love Romans 1:1-7; Matt 1:18-25

There's a person in the Christmas story who shows an extraordinary maturity and wisdom, and that's Joseph. So often when we hear the story of Jesus' birth Mary is understandably the central figure, but in his account Matthew focuses on Joseph, and so today I want to look at it from Joseph's point of view. Paul in our Romans passage mentions that Jesus was a descendant of David, and don't forget that this was through Joseph's line, and not Mary's. And what you immediately think on hearing this passage is 'what was going through Joseph's mind when he discovered that "...*Mary was found to be pregnant*"?'.
A pregnant, teenage fiancé was a disaster on so many levels for this family. This talk is based on a new understanding of the text, which as a father I was encouraged by!

I have to credit an extraordinary book called *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes* by Kenneth Bailey which started me reading these verses in a new light, especially with regard to Joseph. The book is a commentary on the gospels with reference to early translations from Iraq, and also has an impressive grasp of first century Jewish culture, which helps you see things you just won't see with 21st century eyes. What might the pressures and expectations have been for Joseph? We're told in v19 that he was 'faithful to the law', so *apparently* a strict Jew, and so wouldn't be expected to show sympathy for Mary.

Remember that although only her fiancé, in Jewish law Joseph would have to divorce Mary if he wasn't going to marry her. Here's the law of the time from Deuteronomy (The Message Deut 22:23) *If a man comes upon a virgin in town, a girl who is engaged to another man, and sleeps with her, take both of them to the town gate and stone them until they die.*

But Matthew says that ***because Joseph was faithful to the law, yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.***

This doesn't add up. Matthew seems to think Joseph was obeying a different law entirely. Surely he should have turned Mary over to the authorities?

And in any case he must have been extremely disturbed and angry at what he initially saw as Mary's betrayal.

Why does Matthew not say this? Well actually he does. It seems that a more accurate translation of *after he had considered this* in verse 20 is *after he became angry over this matter*. Matthew uses the same Greek word (*enthymeomai*) to describe Joseph's anger as when he describes Herod's rage about the Wise men not telling him the whereabouts of Jesus. It's *interesting* that the two are translated so differently!

Anyway who wouldn't be angry if their supposed virgin fiancé had got pregnant by some stranger?

Many centuries of seeing this perfectly ordinary Jewish couple as saints have obscured the real story.

Joseph had been betrayed – at least that was what he was *suspecting* before he realised the truth. The different translation would also more clearly explain the need for the angel's reassuring words to Joseph *don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife. In other words, she's not betrayed you. The baby really is a miracle.*

So I think Joseph had a better understanding of justice than the usual 'eye for an eye' of Jewish law, and was horrified at the idea of stoning anyone, especially if they were innocent. AND quite simply, he obviously loved her!

A completely new idea of justice could be found at the time in the book of Isaiah, 42:3-4, where it says *God won't brush aside the bruised and the hurt and he won't disregard the small and insignificant, but he'll steadily and firmly set things right. He won't tire out and quit. He won't be stopped until he's finished his work—to set things right on earth.* (The Message)

Joseph undoubtedly saw Mary as bruised and hurt, but under the strict rules neither divorce nor marriage would have been possible. Jesus would never have been born.

Isaiah's much more positive idea of God as just and merciful rather than the very common Old Testament image of him as angry and judgemental seems to me to make more sense *and* to be behind Joseph's actions. God himself was going to be born.

How could his own laws prevent that from happening?

There must have been a terrible pressure on Joseph from the whole community to keep the law. But obviously he resisted as soon as he knew the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and not by an unidentified lover. One further thing – in Jewish culture the husband would always represent the family in legal matters, so why would Joseph have taken Mary with him for the census in the first place? I think he must have been unwilling to leave her behind in her condition without his protection. Who knew what might have happened? And so Joseph comes out of this as much more than just the background figure we get in Luke, and actually as a true man of God, a man of boldness and courage and integrity who was able to resist the pressure and marry Mary despite the scandal. A man who was able to see beyond the rules and the tradition and to judge what was the best thing for Mary, who he must have realised was not capable of what she appeared to have done. The community's opinion would have been confined to the fact that Jesus was conceived outside of marriage. Enough said... The angel's version of events – a baby conceived by God himself. Mind blowing but actually, the more likely to be true! And Joseph knew it!

So we see that God had intended to use Joseph as well as Mary and he had Joseph in mind as a father because of his integrity, and his ability to protect the family in a number of very dangerous situations in the next couple of years.

In chapter 2 of Matthew the angel comes again to Joseph in a dream and he doesn't hesitate to act on a word from God. He was undoubtedly very sensitive to the Spirit. If any of us think we are unable to be used by God we can see that if we are ready to listen and then act on it he can use us, whoever we are. Joseph overcame a very difficult situation and saw it transformed by the grace of God, because of his obedience. Joseph was a great role model for Jesus. We see very little of him in the rest of the gospels but God used him to play a vital role, so that his son could act to bring salvation for all people, for all time. Amen.