

THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD—CHRISTMAS EVE

Text: St. Matthew 1:18-25

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✱ SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

It should come as no surprise to anyone that God's plans, more often than not, do not exactly agree with the plans of men. Saint Joseph, being a righteous man, had in mind to quietly divorce his young, not so virgin betrothed bride (at least it appeared so according to circumstances as he perceived them). But God's thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. His thoughts and ways are beyond our finding out.

You may wonder, *"If Joseph was only betrothed to St. Mary, what need was there for a divorce?"* We ask that question because we are not first century Jews.

You see, first century Jewish customs were quite different from the Western customs of today, or even the last several hundred years for that matter; even more so, for those of us born as heirs of the last two centuries of American culture and traditions, which have been so heavily influenced by Western European culture and the so-called "Age of Enlightenment."

When St. Mary, the mother of God, was betrothed to her husband, St. Joseph, Jewish law and custom dictated that a betrothal lasted for a period of up to twelve months for a virgin maiden. Though during that period the betrothal was legally binding, it was only considered the first stage of marriage and the virgin girl was to remain a virgin, the marriage remaining unconsummated until the nuptial ceremony had taken place at the end of the betrothal period. Therefore, betrothal, like marriage, could only be dissolved by divorce or death.

But in the case of Mary and Joseph, God had a different plan in mind. The Child that had made Mary's womb a temporary holy temple of the LORD was the promised and long awaited IMMANUEL. He is *"God with us"* born to save His people from their sins! This Child is from God and is God!

Being a righteous man, Joseph was about to do the wrong thing for the right reasons. So, God intervened, sending a divine messenger, the angel Gabriel, to Joseph in a dream, telling him to put aside his fears and pride and take St. Mary as his wife. He did so and took Mary into his home, and St. Joseph did not *"know"* her until she gave birth to God's SON.

"So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the LORD through the prophet, saying: 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a SON, and they shall call His name IMMANUEL,' which is translated, 'God with us.'" In this way JESUS was born. He came as God's Anointed One and as the proof of God's faithfulness to an unfaithful people. He is the *"Seed of Abraham"* and the true Israel whose FATHER is neither Abraham nor Joseph, but God the FATHER Himself.

He is JESUS, whose purpose and work is revealed in His name, for the name, JESUS, means “*God saves.*” He has come to “*save His people from their sins.*” He has come to save us because we have no power to save ourselves and He will do so through His innocent suffering and death upon the cross of Calvary.

So, the angels rejoice, “*Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!*” With joy, the Infant JESUS is faithfully sought out by shepherds who believe. Yet, this joy would not last long. King Herod was troubled and all Jerusalem with him. The world will hate Him and seek to murder Him. He will be beaten nearly to death, spit upon, and finally nailed to a cruel tree.

But God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His ways higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts. The Father would use the hatred of corrupt men to further His plan of salvation and establish His Kingdom and reign among men upon whom His favor rests. His Word has gone out from His mouth and became flesh and dwelt among us “*... and we beheld His glory, as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*”

This is the story of our SAVIOR and the history of our salvation. For this Babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, seemingly helpless in His holy mother’s arms, will cast out demons and battle Satan, He will make the lame to walk and the blind to see, He will make lepers clean, and heal the sick and He will even beat back death. This Infant, who is God in the flesh of His creation, will die that you and I may live and never die.

Therefore, the story of our salvation does not realize its climax in Bethlehem, but on a lonely hill outside the gates of Jerusalem. There, JESUS, the Man of sorrows, who suffered the humiliation of His incarnation and birth, would bare our griefs and carry our sorrows, for His FATHER’s plan meant that His anointed One should bare the iniquities of us all by shedding His blood to save us. In JESUS, God has come to His people forgiving sin in the sacrifice of His own flesh in order to push back the gloom of death. He was born that we should “*see the salvation of our God.*”

Therefore, CHRIST came down from heaven and was “*incarnate by the HOLY SPIRIT of the Virgin Mary, and was made Man.*” And the angels rejoice. The angels rejoice because this Babe is born to die, that you and I may have life—full and eternal life. The angels rejoice because JESUS is born a spotless sacrifice to propitiate, that is, to satisfy, the wrath of His FATHER and join together God and man, heaven and earth, in the bonds and unity of peace.

When you look into the manger and see there the Babe of Bethlehem, remember also the One who died to save you. Remember and “*proclaim His death until He comes.*” Our Salvation comes in a Babe laid in a manger, the feeding trough of beasts, but even more importantly, He comes as our SAVIOR laid in a tomb, the repose of the dead. He comes to rise again, leaving your sin and death dead in the grave. He comes that He would become for us the Food of Immortality, in which the Church on earth finds its life and the Church Triumphant

celebrates its victory in CHRIST, the Lamb who was slain from the foundations of the earth and yet lives.

This is the truth of the Babe unto to whom the angels sing, lifting their voices in an eternal “*gloria in excelsis Deo, glory be to God on high.*” This is the truth of the Babe found lying in an animal stall by the shepherds at His birth, the same Babe who would be spat upon by the venomous crowds at His crucifixion, and worshiped with awe by His Apostles at His resurrection and ascension.

This is the truth the of Infant JESUS, the God who saves, and our IMMANUEL—God with us; the Infant JESUS who has come to save His people from their sins.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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12/24/23 A✠D