

Matthew 1.18-25

Pathfinder Carol Service: CC Abingdon, 19.12.04

Introduction

What happens when a baby is born? Lots of mess, noise, smell, more mess... Amidst all that 'joy', the parents have to choose a name for their baby.

My first name, 'Benjamin', means 'son of my right hand', and my middle name, 'Charles', means 'strong, manly'. Why don't you all turn to your neighbours and ask them what their names are and what they mean. If you don't know what they mean, try and find someone who does!

< Ask any volunteers to say what their names mean. Use baby names book to tell them if they didn't know. >

Today we're going to learn about a baby who had at least twenty names. Luckily for you our reading has only two of them: *Jesus* and *Immanuel*.

Main Talk

We are now going to look at how the birth of Jesus came about, and at what on earth a 2000-year-old baby has to do with us today.

v.18

Mary and Joseph are engaged. Before Jewish couples got married, they spent a whole year ‘engaged’. Unlike engagements today though, it was a legal contract—they were all but living together. The wife-to-be lived with her family. This gave the husband-to-be the chance to put up lots of shelving units from Ikea and make desks and tables and things without her seeing him secretly use the instructions. To end an engagement they had to divorce each other, and if the man died the woman was called a widow. This was a serious thing.

v.19

So you can imagine how scandalous it was for Mary to be found to be pregnant. Joseph knew the baby wasn’t his, so he wanted to divorce her, but he was also a kind man, and

didn't want to humiliate her publicly. He didn't want anything to do with this baby; he wanted to deal with the problem quietly and get on with his life.

You might identify with Joseph. I'm standing here telling you that two thousand years ago a girl named Mary became pregnant before she had slept with anyone. It sounds unbelievable, scandalous and irrelevant, and I can understand if, like Joseph, you would rather dismiss the whole thing and get on with your life.

v.20

But. The first word of verse twenty is probably the most important word in this short passage. *But.* Joseph had made his mind up, he was going to divorce Mary... *but...* Maybe you've made up your mind that this story has nothing to do with 21st century scientific modern people... *but...*

God appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him that Mary had not been unfaithful. He told him that the child was *his*, conceived in her by the Holy Spirit. This child was God's child, and he was to have a very special name.

v.21

Jesus. 'Jesus' is the Greek form of the Hebrew name 'Yehoshua', or 'Joshua', which means 'God saves'. It was a popular name at the time Jesus was born, given to express hope and faith. Hope and faith that one day God would save his people from the tyranny of the Romans, as he had earlier from the Egyptians. So when the angel says, 'give him the name *Jesus*, because...' we would expect the reason to be something like, 'because *God* will save his people from the Romans.' But it isn't. Instead it's this: give him the name 'Jesus', because *he* will save his people...

Astonishingly, the angel says that *this little baby* will save. The name means 'God saves', and the reason for calling the baby this is, '*he* will save.' The angel is saying that this baby is God. The name 'Jesus' does not mean 'some random peasant from Nazareth saves' but '*God* saves'. This baby, this Jesus, is *God*.

God has come as a little baby to save his people... but from what? From the Romans? From persecution? From tyranny? From their mothers-in-law? No: he has come to save them *from their sins*. You see, whereas tyrannical rulers

and oppressive regimes are bad, our sins our worse. Every time we sin, we set up a barrier between God and ourselves. It stops us from seeing or hearing him, it stops us from having a relationship with him. Jesus came to save all Christians from their sins, to remove the barrier of sin that stands between them and God.

Do you sin? Do you need that barrier to be removed so you can have a relationship with God? I know for me the answer to both questions is ‘Yes.’ Perhaps this baby does have relevance for us modern people today.

vv.22-23

Centuries before Jesus was born, God promised through the prophet Isaiah that a virgin would bear a special son, whom people would call, ‘Immanuel.’ This name means ‘God with us.’ Matthew says here that this baby, is God come to earth to be *with* us forever. < *Read vv.22-23* > The barrier of sin is removed by God—he has come to us so we *don’t* have to go to him. With the barrier gone we can have a relationship with him.

If you’ve spent your life looking for God, looking for

something that's missing from your life, I have some great news for you: that something has come looking for you. God himself has made the journey to be with us, so we don't have to.

Before Jesus went back up to heaven he made this promise: 'I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.' Although Jesus was born two thousand years ago, although he made that journey to be with us two thousand years ago, he is still here today, with us now, in this room. He's sitting there beside you in a wooden chair, he's standing up here with me.

Not only is he not irrelevant, he's actually here now. He does not live in the past—like a Roman Emperor or the Tudors and Stewarts—he lives *now*. He is with us always—that's his name, that's who he is: *God...with...us*.

vv.24-25

So what now? If you remember, Joseph had made up his mind to dismiss the whole thing. Maybe you had too, because you thought the whole thing childish and irrelevant. *But...*

But... God told Joseph the truth about the baby, and he's telling you today. This baby, born two thousand years ago, was and is God, come to be with us forever, come to save us from our sins that separate us from him.

When *Joseph* heard the truth, he accepted it, went home and married Mary. < *Read vv.24-25* > He had to live with the disgrace of having a child out of wedlock. But he knew the truth; Mary had not been unfaithful, they had not slept together; their child was really *God's* Son, named 'Jesus'. Joseph realised that it was more important to *listen* to God and *obey* him, than to worry about what other people thought about him.

Today, God has told you the truth, the good news about his Son Jesus. He asks that you follow him with your whole life, not just your life on Sunday mornings. It won't be easy, as Joseph found, but the reward is to be with God forever, starting today. It's no good waiting until you die because it'll be too late. You have to ask him to remove the barrier of sin *now*, before it's too late. Because Jesus didn't stay a baby. He grew up and one day he's coming back as our Judge. If that sin is still there when he returns then you will rightly be

punished for it, and miss out on spending forever with God.

So what will you do? Will you dismiss as irrelevant this baby who grew up to be your Judge? Or will you spend the rest of forever with him, starting today? The choice is yours.