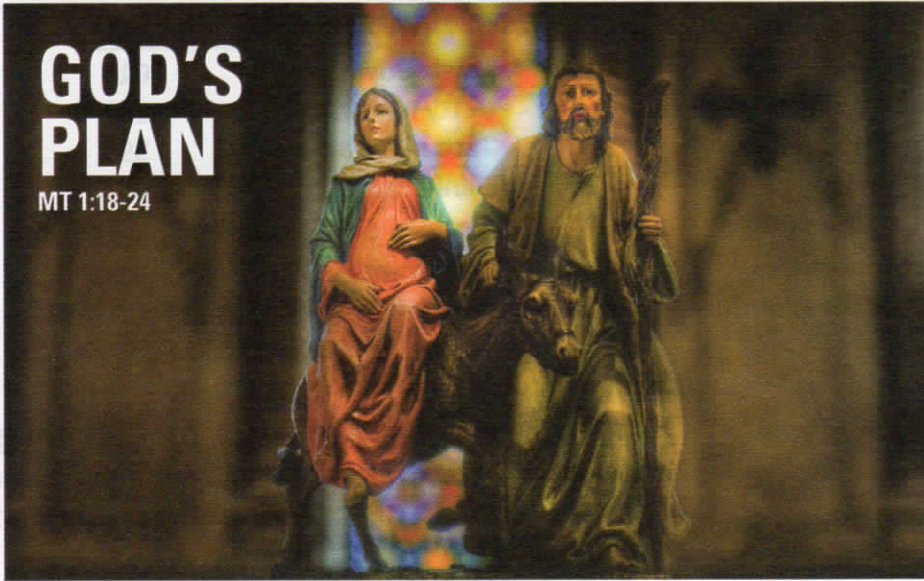


GOD'S PLAN

MT 1:18-24



The main character in Matthew's account of the conception of Jesus is Joseph.

It is Joseph who receives the annunciation from God via the angel of the Lord about the coming birth of the Messiah. It is Joseph who will give the child the name Jesus. It is Joseph who must decide whether or not to co-operate with God in the divine plan for our salvation.

Joseph is faced with a dilemma: he is a faithful observer of the Law, and so is duty-bound to break off his engagement to Mary, his pregnant fiancée, but decides to do so in an informal manner which will attract the least publicity. It takes the direct intervention of the Lord in a dream to convince him that he should accept the situation, marry Mary and bring up her child as his own.

The key to this story lies in the expression Joseph, son of David. Matthew wants to establish that Jesus stands in the line stretching back to David, the great king of Israel, the one to whom the Lord promised an everlasting dynasty. If Joseph accepts Jesus as his son, then Jesus becomes the son of David by virtue of Joseph being his legal or adoptive (not physical) father. The gospel story of Joseph recalls the Hebrew patriarch of the book of Genesis, the lord of dreams, the one who saves his family by taking them to Egypt, although under very different circumstances. For Matthew and his Jewish Christian community these connections would have been obvious and highlighted the importance of Joseph in God's plan.

In his list of Jesus' ancestors, Matthew includes certain skeletons in the cupboard which remind us that they were not the perfect, ideal individuals that we might expect to be included in God's plan for the human race. Human life is messy, and that is where God is to be found. It is in a situation of apparent disgrace and crisis that the divine title God-is-with-us is revealed. ■

LEARN

Joseph is the legal, not the natural father of Jesus. It is through this relationship that Jesus is the son of David.

Joseph in Matthew's account recalls the Joseph (of The Technicolour Dreamcoat fame) who appears at the end of the book of Genesis and is described cynically by his brothers as the Lord of Dreams.

Joseph is the central character in Matthew's account of the conception and birth of Jesus.

Joseph would have been a vigorous young man: the common idea of his being much older than Mary comes from a later time than the writing of the Gospel.

REFLECT

It is usually clear who a child's mother is. It is not always so obvious who is the father. In societies such as that of the time of Jesus, it was the custom to bring the newborn infant and lay her or him at the feet of the woman's husband. If the man picked up the child, he was acknowledging himself as the father and the child as his own. In this way, Joseph would acknowledge Jesus as his (adopted) son but without necessarily claiming to be his natural father.

As we think about Joseph, we might remember those men who have undertaken to look after children who are not their own, either by adopting or by marrying a woman who already has a family. As a Christian community we should support them. We might also remember those boys and young men who have no father figure in their lives. This is a major factor in the cases of young men who end up in prison. As a Church we have been asked to reflect during the past year on the importance of family life: the story of Joseph shows that the father (or the father figure) has a vital role to play. ■



SAY

They will call him Emmanuel, a name which means 'God-is-with-us'.

DO

Read the first two chapters of the Gospel according to Matthew. Imagine that this is the only account of the conception and birth of Jesus: how would this affect your understanding of the Christmas story?

