

Dear Friends,

Matthew 1: 18

For Luke, the story starts in Nazareth. He tells of Mary and Joseph being forced by the decree of the Emperor to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem where Jesus is born. Matthew also tells us that Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus. But in his story Mary and Joseph do not need to travel there. They live there. It is their settled family home. They only move a couple of years after the birth of Jesus, when they are warned to get away from Herod, because he wants Jesus dead. The family then escape and become refugees in Egypt. Eventually, they return to Israel. When they do, they decide to make a new home in Nazareth as they still fear for their safety in Bethlehem.

For our story this week, we are listening to Matthew, so we begin in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was a village. We sing "O little town of Bethlehem". It wasn't a town. Towns had walls to give them security. Bethlehem did not have a wall to protect the locals. I imagine that it was the poorer and more vulnerable people who lived in the villages. Those with a bit more money made sure that they had the best defences. Bethlehem was just a settlement, a small cluster of houses, with not more than about a hundred people living there.

Amongst these were Mary and Joseph. The usual age for a man to get married was about 18 to 20, while a woman would be a little younger. Mary and Joseph are betrothed. This was less than being married, but more than what we understand by engagement. All the preliminaries and legalities had been carried out. Joseph or his family had paid the bride price. The couple are already called husband and wife. All that remains is for Joseph to take Mary home and for the relationship to be consummated.

Then, Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant. The story goes that she is "with child by the Holy Spirit". That is, the child is a gift from heaven, a gift of grace, a gift from God. But all Joseph knows is that his young bride is expecting a baby and he is not the father. What is he to do? Matthew tells us that he is "righteous". What might we expect from a "righteous" person in these circumstances?

A righteous person is committed to being about God's business and advancing God's cause. A righteous person would be likely to have strong moral principles. You would expect them to draw clear red lines and to keep the letter of the law. In the book of Deuteronomy the letter of the law says that if a woman is found not to be a virgin when she gets married, then she is to be stoned to death. This ultimate sanction was not often carried out, more usually the relationship would be ended through divorce. But it would not be surprising if there were hard liners who campaigned for all the rules to be enforced as they were laid out in the scriptures. Would Joseph's righteousness be like this? And if it was what would happen to Mary and to her unborn child?

God bless you,

Tony