

Dear Friends,

Matthew 1: 19-25

Joseph has a dilemma. He is a righteous man who has discovered that his young bride Mary is pregnant. He knows that he is not the father and so wonders what he is to do. How is a righteous person supposed to act in these circumstances? He has three options.

Option number one is to demand that the letter of the law, as laid out in the commands of Moses, be observed. If he demands that, Mary will be stoned to death.

Option number two is to divorce Mary in a public court in front of many witnesses. Maybe in Bethlehem this would have been a gathering of the elders of the village. If Joseph divorced Mary in this way, he could be sure of getting back the bride price that his family had paid. He could also put in a claim for the dowry that Mary's family would have given. And, most of all, he would publicly make clear that the child was not his. He could lay the blame fully on Mary. There would still be shame on him, that it had happened at all, but his shame would be reduced and consequently Mary's would be increased.

His third option is to divorce Mary in front of only two witnesses. That was the minimum that was required. It would be a costly choice for Joseph, but it would leave Mary with just a little self-respect.

While Joseph is considering what to do, I wonder how Mary is feeling. We have seen that she is a gutsy woman with a revolutionary heart, but what she is going through is enormous. She is therefore likely to be feeling quite frightened about what lies ahead, both about the birth, and if she survives that, about her future.

Joseph decides to take option three, to divorce Mary quietly. But before he can act on his decision a fourth option comes to him. He has a dream. In his dream an angel of the Lord gives him a message. The angel tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. The child, he is told, comes from God. Through the child, God will save the people from their sin and give them forgiveness. Matthew sees this as a fulfilment of the prophecy that told of a virgin who would give birth to child who would be called Emmanuel, which means "God is with us".

Joseph wakes from sleep and knows what to do. He will not enforce the letter of the law and demand Mary's death. Nor will he divorce her in a public court. He will not even divorce her quietly in front of just two witnesses. No, he will go ahead with the marriage as planned.

This will be costly. He will spend the rest of his life putting up with the cruelty of others. There will be those who want to shame him because his wife was pregnant before they were married, or those who make cruel comments about whether he is the father and speculate about who the real father might be. Joseph however

knows that this is what it is to be righteous. It is to do what God wants. It is to be kind and loving.

What is asked of you? What is it to be led in the paths of righteousness? Our story reminds us again that it's the simple things. It's doing what God wants. It's showing kindness. This kindness accepts people as they are, forgives them, stays by them in difficult times, acts generously towards them even when it's costly. That's the way of Jesus and he calls you to follow him along that way.

God bless you,

Tony