

**“She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus,
for he will save his people from their sins.” (St. Matthew 1.21)**

Where on Christmas Eve we heard the story of the Birth of Jesus from Luke’s Gospel, today we have the other account, from the Gospel of Matthew. St. Luke gives us all the familiar details of the “Bethlehem story”, even including the story of the Annunciation to Mary, whereas Matthew gives us a shorter version, all from the perspective of Joseph. Now, as I mentioned on Christmas Eve, Matthew was a Jewish author writing for a Jewish audience. He wanted to prove that Jesus was the Christ in accordance with all the prophecies that came before. He thus contributes a significant amount of effort to telling the story of the Messiah in a context that uses these Old Testament prophecies as proofs of Jesus’ Messiahship. This was less about the precision and detail we find in Luke’s account, for Matthew was emphasizing something different altogether. We don’t even get the word “Bethlehem” until the next chapter.

Matthew opens his Gospel with the words “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1.1). This is in itself a statement as to Matthew’s goals: he is set to prove that Jesus is the Christ, and he is a descendant of David and a continuity of the Covenant of Abraham. He then goes on to give a list of Biblical characters from Abraham all the way to Jesus, but in three groupings: the first from Abraham to David, the second from David to the exile in Babylon, and third from the exile to Jesus. Fourteen, fourteen, and fourteen generations.

Sometime before the conception of Jesus, Mary and Joseph entered a legal contract to be wed. According to the prevailing Jewish law, betrothal already established a legal bond between the two parties, so that Mary could be called Joseph’s wife, even though he had not yet taken her into his home. This state of betrothal lasted for a year, during which time the woman would still live at home with her parents, until the husband would take her into his home. So, when Joseph discovered that she was pregnant, he assumed that the covenant between them had been broken and made plans to dissolve the relationship. In making these plans for divorce, Matthew says that Joseph was “a just man and unwilling to put her to shame” (Matt. 1.19) by choosing to go about it privately.

This term, ‘a just man’, or in Hebrew *Tzadik*, says quite a lot about Joseph’s character – far more than just that he wanted to spare his betrothed wife embarrassment. It simultaneously gives us an overall picture of Joseph and aligns him with the great figures of the Old Testament, beginning with Abraham, the just. “If we may say that the form of piety found in the New Testament can be summed up in the expression ‘a believer,’ then the Old Testament idea of a whole life lived according to sacred Scripture is summed up in the idea of ‘a just man’”¹. To this day, *Tzadik* is an honorific title in Judaism given to people considered righteous, such as biblical figures and later spiritual masters.²

So, we are presented within a few short sentences the idea that Joseph is a righteous, spiritual man who is ancestrally connected to Abraham and David, but he still believes he needs to divorce his wife. Suddenly, in a dream, an angel of the Lord appears to him and tells him that Mary’s baby is of the Holy Spirit, and that he is to call him Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1.21). He woke from sleep, and when the baby was delivered, he did as the angel commanded him and named the child Jesus. Once again, this snippet of information speaks to Joseph’s spirituality, for he recognized and obeyed the will of God from an apparition

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 39.

² Ratzinger, in *Jesus of Nazareth* (see note above), gives a compelling scriptural evaluation of what makes a “just man” through the lens of Psalm 1, and applies this to the figure of St. Joseph.

in a dream with great courage. But it is the last sentence that draws our attention the most: when she had given birth to her first-born son, “he called his name Jesus.” (Matt. 1.25). Joseph, by naming the child as the angel of the Lord had commanded, legally and fully adopted him as his own Son. In doing so, he adopted Jesus into the lineage of David which Matthew laid out at the beginning of his Gospel. He could be called a son of David.

Following Jesus’ birth, Joseph receives another message in a dream, which warns him of the coming massacre of Herod, who plans to kill all young boys out of jealousy. And, he has another dream while in Egypt to say the massacre is over and Herod has died. Other than the episode of Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem during the Passover visit when he was about twelve, we have no other later mention of Joseph. We believe he was a carpenter, because somebody asks about Jesus, “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” (Matt. 13.55), but otherwise we know nothing about Joseph. Many early Christian writers wrote to try and determine some facts about his life, but none are conclusive. Since he does not appear in any of the Passion narratives, there is some consensus that he may have died before Jesus’ ministry began. But, owing to the Gospel’s focus on the facts of his ministry, we do not have any of these details. Much of the information about Jesus’ adoptive father are now lost to time and are known only to God.

Both this story from Matthew and the Epistle have something to tell us, though, about the idea of adoption. Joseph, as we have discussed, adopted the Christ child into his family lineage to protect the child and his wife, Mary. St. Paul suggests that like Joseph adopted Jesus, God adopts all believers as his children. All people, whether they grow up to be rich, famous, or powerful, started in the same way. All of them started being cared for, swaddled, and fed. The most powerful among us, contrary to what propaganda might want you to believe, did the same thing. It is one of the beautiful equalizers of our human state. And God was no different. He sent his only-begotten Son to be cared for by humans in a human way, in order to redeem all human lives, so that we might be adopted into *his* family, says St. Paul. God’s adoption of us sends his Spirit into our hearts so that we might know him as our Father and cry out to him “Abba! Father!” and make us truly righteous as sons and daughters of God.

Tzadik Joseph, who adopted Jesus as his own Son, is a model of the righteous spirit, who had faith in God and responded to his call and was a model of a *just man* who followed the ways of the Lord. He adopted the Son Jesus so that he might be protected in his vulnerability, so that he would grow up to save the world from their sins, and by doing so, allowed us all to have the opportunity to be adopted by God as his own children. Joseph, like Mary, allowed God to use him for His purposes that stretched far beyond his imagination. The obedience of Joseph and Mary allowed God’s grace to flow into this world in a new and saving way.

So, following the example of St. Joseph, may we have such faith that we open ourselves to the will of God, that his grace may flow through our words and deeds to glorify him in all we do. May St. Joseph’s being “*just*” be an inspiration to us all to open our hearts to the incarnate Word of God, so that we may receive him and fully become heirs of God.

And now unto God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion, power, honour, and glory as is most justly due. Henceforth and forevermore.

Amen.