

We journey ever closer to the manger. We saw how God first set up the old priest Zechariah and his wife Elisabeth to have their long-awaited child in their old age, the child who would, at the appropriate time, reveal the Christ, *I baptise you with water for the repentance of sins, but He who is coming after me, is mightier than I whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*¹

Mary's journey to the manger started with a moral shock to the mind, but this God-trusting woman accepted and consented to God's plan, to conceive the Christ-Child.

God brought together the lives of Mary and her cousin Elisabeth, seen as the lives of their sons would cross paths in a significant way. We do not have documented evidence that the two met again, but knowing how close-knit families are in Middle Eastern society, Mary *might* have visited Elisabeth to console her after her son John the Baptist's gory death in the hands of a crazed Herod and his equally debauched wife'; and if she were alive at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, Elisabeth would have gone to comfort Mary. Isn't it a beautiful example of friendship between an older woman and a young girl?

Last Sunday we explored Joseph's journey to the manger and discovered how a life of faith and trust in God, makes it possible (*not always easier!*) to let God take the lead, against all social norms and customs, and against all odds.

Every stage in the journey to the manger was significant, every stage was a test of faith, an escalating test, *if you have trusted Me thus far, will you trust me for the next step?* This is typical of, truly characteristic of, the journey of faith: our faith grows as we progress in the journey of life.

It would be a gross understatement to say that rulers and leaders of countries and nations are genuine in their sympathy and concern for the

¹ Matthew 3:11

problems of the common citizen, let alone do anything about it. In the last few years, we have seen leaders come to power, elected or otherwise, who despite their rhetoric, claims and promises, do very little to live up to any of them, or even are capable of doing anything.

So it was, in the months running up to Jesus' birth. A mad Caesar in Rome wanted to know if there were any undeclared tax payers in his kingdom, so he ordered (decreed) a census.

In the absence of instant communication systems we have today, **the decree went out**; soldiers on horseback (then, the fastest way to travel) carried a scroll and read it out in towns, cities and villages across the empire.

That Mary was pregnant, entering her third trimester most likely, was of no concern to Caesar, nor Quirinius who was Governor of Syria at the time. The census had to be carried out, and that was that. Let the common citizen make their own arrangements as needed.

Joseph had several decisions to make: should he take Mary with him, or make a dash for Bethlehem by himself, try to do the needful to register himself and Mary, figure out whether to declare the yet to be born child... Either way, it would mean a loss of income for a while; pending work had to be placed on hold. He would have to inform all his clients of this, and hope and pray they would be understanding.

Surely one question would have caused him concern: in the public conscience, the first three months of Mary's pregnancy while she was at cousin Elisabeth's house, was unaccounted. In Nazareth, every one knew the day and time Mary moved in with Joseph, and the grapevine gossip circle would have already calculated when to expect Mary's first-born child.

The odds were stacked against Mary. If Joseph was not present when the baby was born, Mary's life would have been a tormented misery!

Imagine their private conversations, with Mary mostly pleading, *but Joseph, please don't go..., Joseph please don't leave me alone and go..., Joseph, if we **must** go, the sooner we leave, the better I can manage the journey...*

Take a moment to imagine Joseph's angst. First, to take Mary as his wife, whom he knows is not carrying his child, and now to find ways of protecting Mary's reputation, along with the baby's and his.

The Gospels do not provide details about the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, primarily because it was the authors intention to focus on the person of Jesus the Christ. From a human perspective, the journey would not have been easy; it was against all the odds.

Some say it was valour over discretion, but I think it was Joseph's trust in God's wisdom over his own intuition and gut feel, to take Mary with him to Bethlehem. The journey of 80 - 100 miles would normally take 5 - 7 days, but with Mary in the final trimester of her pregnancy, it would have been much longer.

The Roman historian Josephus Flavius writes, "*It is the custom of the Galileans at the time of festival to pass through the Samaritan territory on their way to the Holy City.*" He is aware of the strained relationship between Jews and Samaritans, but he notes that *during the festival*, pilgrims were granted safe passage through Samaria. We can safely suppose that the couple might have taken the road which they usually took to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

Now, as an aside. Do you remember two men walking on the road to Emmaus after Jesus' resurrection, discussing the events in Jerusalem about Jesus' crucifixion, trying to make sense of it, and how the risen Christ came alongside them for the journey? What did they do when they reached their home? They invited Jesus in, **insisting** He join them for the evening meal.

Read this in parallel with the Apostle Peter's advice, "*Be hospitable to one another without complaint*"²; read both the above alongside other social commentaries of the time, and we would not be wrong in believing that people living along the pilgrim route, would invite travellers into their homes to refresh themselves, enjoy a shared meal and rest for the night.

The interesting thing in the Christmas narrative, in Joseph and Mary's life is, to those who place their faith in God, trusting His direction and His plans, they see God at work looking after them, through life's seeming difficulties.

God does not need to prove Himself in order for us to have faith in Him; God wants us to place our faith in Him and trust Him, and He will do everything to ease the stress and strain of the journey.

Joseph and Mary placed their trust in God and His plan. Some say, *What choice did they have?* Well, they both had the choice to say "NO" to God's plan, and do things their own way; after all, Joseph was considering divorcing Mary, trying to figure a way which would not hurt her reputation.

But they both walked closely with God; their character was shaped by their walk with God; their faith was moulded by their walk with God, and despite the odds working against them, despite difficulties and problems, they **chose to** obey God.

As a scholar, Luke writes clearly and distinctly. He reveals how Joseph reasoned and made sense of the situation and acted suitably. *Responding to the census call, everyone made arrangements and travelled to the cities where their family records were kept. **So, because Joseph belonged to the house and family of David**, he took the decision to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where the records of his family's ancestral line was kept, and he*

² 1 Peter 4:9

took Mary with him.³ Come what may, they were husband and wife, and they would journey together.

We are instructed to obey the laws of the land and the edicts of its rulers, and that is what Joseph did; and God took care of the detailed inconveniences along the way.

Finally, we should note, the phrase *there was no room in the inn*, is not central to the story of Jesus' birth. **We** have written the story: **because there was no room in the inn**, Mary had the baby in a barn or animal shelter at the back of the inn where the inn-keeper kept his animals.

Luke tells us how it happened. *All went to be registered... so Joseph, being a descendant of David... went to Bethlehem with his wife ... and whilst there, it was time for her to give birth to her baby ... she wrapped Him in swaddling cloths as the baby clothes were back in Nazareth (!) and laid Him in a manger; there was no room anywhere, even in the local inn.*

"No room in the inn" is not the cause of the problem. Note how Luke tells it: Mary gave birth to the baby (it would appear, quite normally), wrapped him snugly in swaddling cloths, then laid Him in the only place available, a manger, which is normally found in a home, where a family would lay a newly born calf, or lamb, or chicks to keep them warm and safe. God provided a safe and comfortable place for Mary to deliver her baby. The local inn could not have catered for Mary's need for privacy during childbirth, because of the overflow of people arriving in Bethlehem for the census.

We cannot be sure what it was really like, but one thing is for sure, it wasn't anything like what is depicted on Christmas cards, and manger scenes on display at this time of the year.

³ Luke 2:3-5

How do we see ourselves in this story? What lessons can we take from the journey against all the odds?

Joseph had many questions, which were not answered the way he wanted them answered. Surely, this was not the way any parent would plan for their child to be born.

If the journey of your life has brought you to a point where you are asking the **how** and **why** questions Joseph asked, can I persuade and encourage you to do what Joseph did: **Obey**. That's what he did. He obeyed. He obeyed when the angel called. He obeyed when Mary explained. He obeyed when God said *Take her as your wife*. He obeyed when God pointed to Egypt and said *Hurry!*

He didn't let his questions, nor the confusion in his mind, disrupt his obedience.

Yes, Joseph didn't know everything, but he acted on what he knew. He acted in obedience to the law of the land, and in obedience to God.

What would you have done, if you were Joseph? You cannot see the whole picture; you don't understand God's entire plan, but... like Joseph, you have a choice: to obey or disobey. Because Joseph obeyed, God used him to be an agent to bring change in our world.

God is always looking, even today, for people with Joseph and Mary's heart and mind; men and women who will be obedient to His Word, and accept His leading.

The Christmas narrative is about common people who serve an uncommon God.

Will you be that kind of person? Will you serve, and be part part of God's great plan, even when you don't understand?

It's about journeying against the odds. **AMEN.**