

St Michael and All Angels

Ōtautahi / Christchurch

21 December 2025 / 4th Sunday of Advent

Homily

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus Christ happened this way. While his mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband-to-be, was a righteous man, and because he did not want to disgrace her, he intended to divorce her privately. When he had contemplated this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

This all happened so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled: “Look! The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will name him Emmanuel,” which means “God with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did what the angel of the Lord told him. He took his wife, but did not have marital relations with her until she gave birth to a son, whom he named Jesus.

Introduction

Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus is brief, understated and reserved. Before we hear about the angel Gabriel, the joy of John the Baptist, the arduous journey to Bethlehem, the stable with its manger, and an angel of the Lord appearing to shepherds, we first meet Joseph, a righteous and honourable man who is betrothed to Mary. However, according to Matthew, upon hearing that Mary is 'with child,' Joseph is now troubled. Because of Mary's news, his world is turned upside down, and his plans no longer make sense. Yet, in this upheaval and in this place of doubt, God is already at work in Joseph's life, reminding us that, even in difficult times, when Jesus draws close, yes, there may be disruption, but God is with us and, consequently, all of life is being actively reshaped.

Call him Jesus

In our gospel, the angel's message to Joseph sits at the core of this story: "You will name him Jesus, because he will save people from their sins." Before Jesus heals, before the sea is calmed, water is turned into wine, or demons are cast out. Before any parable is spoken, an angel of the Lord tells Joseph that Jesus will bring what the world needs most: the chance to start anew and return to our original blessing, which we may call forgiveness. Jesus did not come to give us good advice, techniques for self-improvement, or to help us live our 'best life.' He came to offer us salvation, 'to find our existence in the life of God.'¹ To heal creation by bridging the gap between earth and heaven, dissolving all forms of alienation, and breaking down walls of hostility and exclusion, while uniting all that has been severed.² Therefore, Christ's mission, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is that of a king who mediates God's good reign. This divine rule is established not through force but through embodied presence—'God with us' in humility, vulnerability, and faithful commitment. It presents a new model of kingship and liberation that, to this day, many find difficult to reconcile with the traits of a powerful leader.

¹ Fr John Behr / Will God Save the Cosmos?

² Howard A. Snyder and Joel Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace: Overcoming the Divorce Between Earth and Heaven* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), 3.

Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission (American Society of Missiology Series no. 16; Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 32–33.

Emmanuel

Furthermore, Matthew seems to emphasise these points intentionally; not only will the child be called Jesus because ‘he will save people from their sins,’ but he will also bear the title Emmanuel, meaning ‘God with us.’ Not God watching from afar, dining in heaven like a mythical deity. Not a god waiting for us to get everything right before he graces us with his presence. Instead, God chooses to dwell amidst our messy lives and a world filled with uncertainty and trouble. Therefore, in the presence of Jesus, God is never absent. Even in our doubts, fears, vulnerability, and failures, we are never alone. God’s presence has definitively entered humanity and the world through Jesus. This is not merely an abstract claim that ‘God is all around us,’ but the reality that in Christ, God and the kingdom of heaven are fully present. Consequently, the birth of Jesus signifies an unfolding of God’s creative power into human history. In this way, the incarnation proclaims a transformative truth: God’s saving presence is not distant or conditional, but intimately woven into human experience. In Jesus, the Spirit enters the world not only to redeem and restore, but to be with us.

Hesitation and faithful obedience

Nonetheless, amid this announcement of good news, we still see Joseph’s concerns, which, in the context of his story, seem reasonable. For who among us today enjoys being ostracised and subjected to public scorn? In our risk-averse society, we tend to evaluate all possible outcomes and their probabilities, and it is seen as unwise to follow a path without certainty. But for us, Joseph exemplifies what faithful obedience looks like, even when clarity is incomplete. Initially, Joseph does not understand the mystery unfolding in Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant, so his first thought is to protect her by ending the betrothal privately. Yet when he encounters God’s will in a dream, he does what the angel commands. Joseph’s obedience is not dramatic; it is pragmatic and potentially costly. And through that obedience, God’s life-giving path opens—not only for Joseph and Mary, but also for Israel and for the salvation of the world. Like Joseph, this remains our hope: even when we stumble or hesitate, even when concern and questions linger, God does not

withdraw. In Jesus, we find a forgiveness that restores us, a presence that sustains us, and a path to fullness of life that unveils itself when we listen to God.

As we reflect on Joseph's story, we recognise that the birth of Jesus begins not with certainty or triumph, but with honour and trust. God's saving work enters the world quietly, and in Christ, God is not distant but instead draws near to reshape our lives from within. In our season of Advent, like Joseph, we may not see the whole picture, yet we are invited to trust that God is at work in the world and in the uncertainties of life.

Closing Prayer

Faithful God, you enter our world quietly, meeting us with trust. As you were present with Joseph in his confusion and fear, be present with us in the unfinished places of our lives. Through Jesus, Emmanuel, forgive what is broken, heal what is severed, and reshape our lives by your saving love. In this season of waiting, teach us the courage of humble obedience and the grace to trust that you are at work, even when we cannot yet see the way. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.