

## Mary and Joseph

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In the story of the Lord's birth on earth, two characters stand out in bold relief: Mary and Joseph. The wise men and shepherds are fondly remembered, Herod is feared, but in Mary and Joseph we find a love and affirmation that warms our hearts.

This is not surprising, for not only was their natural role crucial to the birth and upbringing of the Lord, but their spiritual representation describes how the Lord is born with us today.

Joseph's story is told almost entirely in the Matthew account. For it is there that his genealogy is traced back to David and Abraham. It is in Matthew that Joseph's character is revealed when he discovered that Mary was pregnant. Sexual relations outside of betrothal or marriage was a capital offense. If Joseph had openly denied he was the father, Mary would have been stoned to death. But Joseph was a just man, and would have sent her away privately. This evidence of concern for Mary was reinforced by his listening to the angel who told him of the Lord's Divine parentage. He did not break the relationship, but married, protected, and provided for her and the family.

Mary's story is found in Luke. Here the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, telling her of the birth of the Lord. Mary was betrothed at the time, and probably in her early teens. She was stunned by the news, for she was a virgin. But when told that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you," she agreed to receive this Divine presence in her body. She was honored at being selected, as is evident from the Magnificat, a song of praise for God.

The relationship of Mary and Joseph was essential for the Lord to be born with them. Being betrothed meant they were legally united. Wedding celebrations in those days, while extensive, were merely the family celebration several years afterwards, after the legal contract was signed. For Mary, being betrothed meant she was looking forward to living with Joseph and bearing his children. Her affections for giving birth and raising a family were growing, an ideal setting, preparing her to receive the Lord.

There was also a protection for the infant Lord in Mary and Joseph's betrothal. Since a betrothed couple were legally joined, it was very common for them to have sexual relations during this time. Because they were betrothed, people would assume that Joseph was the father, and no suspicion or presumption of wrongdoing would befall Jesus or Mary.

And Mary's virginity was vital for the birth of the Lord. For if there had been a natural father, all that could have resulted was a normal human being. A child of Joseph and Mary could have led a good life, and been an excellent example for Christians to follow - but if the

Divine were not the seed He could not have been the Word made flesh, God incarnate. It is only because of the Divine parentage that the Lord could become our God and Savior.

For the Lord choose to come down on earth in human form that He might experience everything of human nature. If God had suddenly appeared without human agency, He could not have changed anything, for the gulf between us and Him was too great to be bridged solely by Him showing Himself. In fact, He had appeared relatively often before – through the angel of Jehovah – and the instructions He gave by this means did not halt the downward trend of mankind, even as the prophets and angels had not before. He chose to be born that He could reach down to our lowest levels – experiencing our pain, our helplessness, our attraction to evil. This could only be done through birth, birth through the virgin Mary.

So Joseph being betrothed to a virgin Mary was essential for the birth of the Lord on earth. These two people were sincere and obedient to the voice of the angel. They could provide a home in which the infant Jesus could receive love and support. But although it was the ideal setting within which the Lord could come, Mary and Joseph were not perfect people. She and Joseph were typical good people of that time, with inclinations to evil like everyone else. Mary was selected because she was normal, meaning from her the Lord could acquire inclinations to all types of evil. And today, in the spiritual world, Mary and Joseph are angels like other angels.

This is the natural basis for the Lord's birth. But Mary and Joseph also spiritually depict what is needed for our reception of the Lord – His birth in our lives today.

Mary represents an affection for what is true (God the Savior 37). It is an innocence, a willingness to look outside of one's own wants and desires and be affirmative to the Lord and what He says, seen by Mary accepting the Lord's birth in her.

This affection is youthful, even as Mary was. But more important, it is virginal. It is not corrupted by selfishness, cynicism, or negative attitudes. These inspire doubts that can cloud any issue, taking away a willingness to follow the Lord. The virginity of Mary is an affection that looks forward with hope. It is an assumption that life has meaning, that there is a Divine force within, guiding and uplifting. It is an openness to the Lord, an innocence in the face of His revelation that responds affirmatively to His presence. This affection to accept what the Lord says is a fertile field in which the Lord can plant the seeds of truth - where He Himself can reside, even as He came into Mary.

But for the Lord, a genuine and lasting good, to be born and grow within a person, the state of betrothal must exist. As Mary represents an affection for truth, Joseph appears to represent an exploration of that truth for the purpose of producing good. This was seen in Joseph's thought about how to respond when he discovered Mary was pregnant. He considered his options and in his wanting to put her away privately sought what was good. Then, although in the night and during a dream – an obscure state – he listened to the angel and followed his instructions.

It is this affection to follow the Lord and willingness to explore how to do so that enables the Lord to descend into our lives. But it is of note that the Lord's birth did not actually come from Joseph. And indeed, His presence in our lives is not born of the desire to learn. Yes, we need to understand the way to heaven, but anything that is truly heavenly is conceived by the Holy Spirit, the power of the Most High.

Our initial desire to explore the Word is tinged with selfishness. Heaven seems like the place to go, and hell certainly does not! Early in regeneration our ideals and desire to go to heaven tend not to be for the reason that we might thereby be more useful to others. We want what looks good and delightful. This is not evil, but it is limited and not genuinely good. This is a key reason why Joseph could not be the Lord's biological father. A love for heavenly things is Divinely, not humanly, conceived.

Yet Joseph appeared to be the Lord's father so that Jesus might be born and raised in an orderly way. So it appears in our own lives - we feel that regeneration can occur solely with our thinking processes, with our efforts. And certainly, we know that if we did not compel ourselves to flee from evils as sins against God, and strive to be charitable, no spiritual development would occur.

But the miracle of the Lord's birth is that the Divine caused it, not a human being. All our sight of what is true, and joy in what is good, is conceived by the Lord. It is the Lord creating a new life, an eternally happy life, that is more than we could ever imagine.

At Christmas time we can especially experience this. In spite of the hurry and tension, how many precious and kind actions seem to spontaneously occur? Part of the attraction of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," and its many successors, is that even in the heart of a self-centered person some good can grow. When we see others apparently transformed by the season, or sense in ourselves something of love and kindness, can we not step back and say, "this was the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes"? (Psalm 118:23) Whenever we experience love, it is always greater than the sum of what we have put into it. This is because it is the Lord's doing. Joseph appears to be the father, just as we seem to make our own happiness, but the reality is that all good and all truth are from the Divine with us.

It is interesting, then, that after the initial stories around the Lord's birth, Mary and Joseph are rarely mentioned in the Gospels. Their role diminishes because what is happening in a growing spiritual life is that selfish motivation is being pushed aside by the Lord.

Mary as an affection or innocence is gradually replaced as a developing heavenly love for good. As we engage in repentance, reformation and regeneration the Lord leads us to forget more about ourselves as He creates a new heart in our lives. This is one reason why the Lord did not refer to Mary as His "mother," and eventually gave her care over to the disciple John.

Joseph, the initial spiritual exploration of the Word, is purified, removing self-centered motivations and creating a greater openness to receive the truths of the Word and see their meaning in life. For in the course of regeneration even our desire to learn from the Word changes in nature. Any conceit we had in what we know is gradually replaced by an awe of what we see there, an appreciation of the Lord's glorious truths.

So as the Lord came on earth in a Divine way, to glorify the Human He assumed, so He desires to be born in the lives of everyone - giving us the power to overcome our evils, and creating us anew in His image and likeness. This He can and will do as we prepare the way for Him. As we have an affection to follow Him, receiving Him into our hearts (the virgin Mary), and betroth that to that a desire to explore the truths of the Lord's Word (Joseph), then the Divine can come among us. The Lord is born and grows up – creating a genuine love for what is eternally good. It is the Lord's doing, not ours. It is His gift of heavenly life to us, a gift of everlasting value. Amen.

Lessons: Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25; TCR 102 (portions)

## Luke 1

<sup>26</sup>Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored *one*, the Lord *is* with you; blessed *are* you among women!"

<sup>29</sup>But when she saw *him*, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. <sup>30</sup>Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. <sup>32</sup>He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. <sup>33</sup>And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."

<sup>34</sup>Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?"

<sup>35</sup>And the angel answered and said to her, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.* <sup>36</sup>Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. <sup>37</sup>For with God nothing will be impossible."

<sup>38</sup>Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

## Matthew 1

<sup>18</sup>Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Then Joseph her husband, being a just *man*, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. <sup>20</sup>But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."

<sup>22</sup>So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: <sup>23</sup>"Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name *Immanuel*," which is translated, "God with us."

<sup>24</sup>Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, <sup>25</sup>and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.

## TCR 102

It is believed that the Lord as to His Human not only was, but still is, the son of Mary; but in this the Christian world is mistaken. It is true that He was the son of Mary, but not true that He still is; for by the acts of redemption He put off the human from the mother and put on a Human from the Father; and this is why the Human of the Lord is Divine, and in Him God is Man, and Man is God. That He put off the human from the mother and put on a Human from the Father, which is the Divine Human, is shown by the fact that He Himself never called Mary His mother....

[3] ... Once it was granted me to speak with Mary the mother. On a certain occasion she passed by and appeared in heaven above my head in white garment like silk; and then pausing a little she said that she had been the mother of the Lord, who was born of her; but that He, having become God, had put off everything human that He had derived from her, and that she therefore worshiped Him as her God, and was unwilling that anyone should acknowledge Him as her son, because in Him all is Divine.