

Mary and Joseph and an inconvenient birth

Exploring the Christmas story

Silvia Purdie

Let's ask questions of the old familiar story ... Do you really know it as well as you think you do??

1. What do we know about these two people, Mary and Joseph? How can we relate to them as real people rather than cardboard cut-outs?
2. How did Mary's world change when she got pregnant?
3. How did Joseph, and his family, react?
4. How was it for Mary giving birth in Bethlehem?
5. Where exactly was Jesus born and why?
6. What are the layers of meaning in our simple nativity scenes?

I want to introduce you to two very important people: Mary and Joseph, Jesus' mum and dad. I'll start with Joseph. He was born to an important Jewish family in Bethlehem, a direct descendent of King David, the family still living in David's own town, Bethlehem, on a ridge in Judea not far from Jerusalem, the heart-land of the Jewish faith. Joseph was a righteous man, well brought up, trained as a builder, skilled in working stone and timber. So how did he end up in Nazareth? Nazareth is up in the north, the gateway to the region of Galilee. Hicksville. Just a little place, rough and ragged. Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had a campaign running to encourage respectable Jews to move north to Galilee to bring a civilizing solid Jewish influence to the wild north. Perhaps Joseph was asked to move there. And perhaps a tragedy triggered his move – perhaps he had been betrothed in Bethlehem and she had died. The Catholic church teaches that he had been married and had several children before being widowed.

Either way, there he is in Nazareth, setting up a new business, an older man, a good man, trying to be a good Jewish role model. And the girl he chooses to marry is Mary.

Mary is young, a teenager, but old enough to marry. Mary was born and bred in Nazareth, as were her parents. But her grandmother had come from Judea, from another of those respectable Jewish towns near Jerusalem. Her grandmother was from a priestly family, and had grown up in and around the Temple (my guess is that Elizabeth was Mary's grandmother's sister). Mary's father was a leader in the synagogue in Nazareth, her mother carrying the mana of being from a priestly line. Mary was a good girl, better educated than most girls, with a deep personal faith.

You know what happened and how it changed everything. One day Mary was alone when an angel popped in for a chat. It was wonderful for me visiting Nazareth. The site that honours the annunciation, the angel's visit, is an ancient well; the church imagined Mary drawing water, perhaps in the early morning, alone with her bucket. There's something deep and powerful about water and solitude and God.

You know how that ends, with Mary's 'yes' and a pregnancy.

What the Bible doesn't tell us is the shock and conflict that followed in Mary's family and community. Everyone wanted to know who had done this to her. Why would she not name her rapist? Everyone was under suspicion. And because there was no one else to blame, Mary herself became the target. There's no more juicy topic for gossip than a good girl turned slut.

Why did Joseph take her with him for the census in Bethlehem? Because she was not safe in Nazareth without his protection. She was in danger of being raped for real and her baby killed.

The Bible does, rather wonderfully, tell us about Joseph's process in coming to terms with the pregnancy. We read that, with an angel's help, Joseph decides, at great personal cost to his reputation, to marry Mary anyway and to formally adopt her child. Curiously though he does not marry her until after the baby is born; the Bible is quite clear that at the time of Jesus' birth they were still only betrothed, not formally married. No doubt Mary and Joseph got 'properly' married in Bethlehem; we know that they stayed on there for a couple of years, living with Joseph's family. By the time they returned to live in Nazareth they were respectable enough, but an echo of the scandal remained and it cast a shadow over Jesus's ministry. He was never quite accepted in proper places.

But back to Joseph's family in Bethlehem. How did they deal with the situation? Our traditional reading of scripture is that Mary and Joseph were not welcome at all. There was, we read, 'no room at the inn'. Were Joseph's family so callous that a 9-month pregnant woman would be turned away at the gate? Of course not, don't be ridiculous. This was a large and respectable family, and Joseph an important son. Of course they would have been welcomed in.

But there was a problem; overcrowding. So many members of the extended family had already arrived that there was no room in the guest room. The word translated 'inn' here is the same word translated 'upper room' later in Luke as the disciples are setting up for the Last Supper. It is not the word for a public hotel, which is a quite different word used in the story of the Good Samaritan, who pays for the wounded man to stay in a commercial 'inn'. What Luke describes as the setting of Jesus' birth a normal house, a private family home. It's the very ordinariness of this that matters to Kenneth Bailey, setting the scene for the appeal of Jesus the teacher to common people, and his ability to express astonishing truth in ordinary ways.

So when they arrived in the crowded home Mary and Joseph were brought right in to the very back of the house, down some steps to the room cut into the rock behind the house, just a cave really, where the animals slept the night. Every family had a stable in the back of the house where their animals would be safe from theft and cold.

Here, with lamps being lit and fresh water brought in, here surrounded by family, with the midwife coming running, here Jesus was born. Not ideal conditions, certainly, but with family.

But it was not Mary's family though. She came into that house as a stranger, and not a very welcome one. Joseph's family wanted better for him than a girl pregnant to another man, but they would have respected his decision, and they would have cared for her as they would one of their own.

Let's pause and talk about all this for a moment.

Tell me how Mary would have felt: she was not safe in her home town and not very welcome in Joseph's home town. She has travelled all this way, been through labour with no familiar faces holding her through it. Her baby is born ... what is Mary feeling?

And how might Joseph have felt? He is home again, possibly the place where he experienced great grief, with people he knows so well but who hardly know him at all any more, with this new young woman he loves passionately, and this baby that is not his but ... what is Joseph feeling?

We are so familiar with this, the nativity scene, the baby in the manger, Mary sitting gazing adoringly, Joseph standing proudly beside her, animals gathered around, Shepherds humbly bowing, Wise Men with their gifts ...

Let Mary and Joseph talk to you about how it was for them, how they felt ...

I hope this has triggered some thoughts and emotions about Christmas, so that you can find Christ again in a fresh way for yourself this Christmas, and can invite your children and families into it also.

Kenneth Bailey, *'Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Cultural studies in the Gospels'*, 2008.

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