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Introduction

Today we encounter the fourth and final paradox which the Gospel readings for this Advent bring before us. The Infancy narratives of Matthew's Gospel – in contrast to those of Luke – say very little about the birth of Jesus per se. Instead the writer concentrates on the reactions of two men – one before and one after – to the news of the event. We will be considering Herod's response during Epiphany, but today the focus is on that of Joseph. By framing the preceding lineage of Jesus in terms of fatherhood (in contrast to the Lucan stress of sonship) Matthew has already prepared us for his account of the way in which the actions of Joseph – by confounding the expectations of the social and religious conventions of his time – pave the way for the purposes of God to unfold in the world.

Text

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah[took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do 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, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Comment

Matthew tells us nothing about Joseph's immediate reactions to the discovery of Mary's pregnancy, but it is not hard to imagine his confusion and the emotions of anger and distress which would have been part of the first, visceral response to such a staggering piece of news.

Marriages in antiquity were made between extended families not individuals, and the process of dis-embedding a young woman from her father's family and

embedding her in that of her new husband involved the whole community and touched deeply on the honour of both families involved. Virginity was the sine qua non of an honourable marriage and thus its loss would inevitably bring shame upon the woman's entire paternal family. In the case of Mary, that the apparent loss occurred during the period of betrothal was doubly shameful because of the significance of this period in the Jewish understanding of the marriage process.

According to the teachings of the Torah, this involved two distinct steps: kiddushin – the setting apart of a particular woman for a particular man, and nisu'in – the formal finalisation of the marriage contract. Nowadays the accompanying ceremonies may well be done simultaneously, but at the time of Jesus' birth, they were separated by a significant period of time. Whilst kiddushin is commonly translated 'betrothal', it does not equate with our modern convention of 'engagement' since it actually made the bride and groom a fully-fledged husband and wife both spiritually and legally; thus even if they did not complete the nisu'in, a get (Jewish divorce) was still required to end the contract.

However it was only after the completion of the nisu'in ceremony that the couple were allowed to live together and engage in sexual relations. In part this was because the period of betrothal was considered to be a time in which the foundations for the vital spiritual connection between husband and wife could be laid (kiddushin is also used in Hosea 2:19, 20 to designate the relationship between God and his people). Its importance is attested to by both the harsh punishment laid down in Deuteronomy for its violation, and the declaration in the Mishna (the first major written redaction of the oral Torah) that adultery during the betrothal period is more serious than adultery after marriage.

When set against this twin sociological and religious backdrop the extraordinary and paradoxical nature of Joseph's actions can be fully appreciated. Deuteronomy 20:22 sets out the chilling punishment for women in Mary's situation, and whilst it is more comfortable to think that stoning did not happen in Jesus' time, the NT presents plenty of evidence to the contrary (e.g. John 8:7; 10:21; Acts 7: 57-60). However even before his dream Joseph displays a willingness to act outside expectations of what constitutes the normal, appropriate response in such a situation. Here the Greek verbs used in verses 19 and 20 to describe how he reached this initial plan of action are revealing. The first – *bulomai* ('planned') – carries the implication of an actively willed choice; the second – *enthumeomai* ('resolved') – means to reflect on or to ponder. In other words, this is a response which has been carefully thought through and deliberately chosen; and that choice is to find an alternative way to preserve the honour of his and Mary's families and the life of Mary and her unborn child. This involved following (even in the absence of evidence) the direction in the accompanying Targum (an ancient aramaic interpretive commentary on the Torah) which allowed for divorce rather than death under the very specific circumstance of rape out in the fields where help could not be summoned by the woman.

Interestingly, *enthumeomai* carries a dual meaning – it can also suggest becoming angry, something which heightens the drama of what Joseph ultimately chooses to do. So then we can perhaps imagine Joseph lying in bed – not tossing and turning before falling into a fevered sleep, but instead turning everything over and over in his mind and gradually reaching a place where the initial incredulity and anger no longer drives his response; a place where he is able to reflect on and actively choose another course of action. Perhaps it was the fact that he had already started on the pathway of seeking a less destructive and more generous response than that dictated by social and religious convention, that subsequently enabled him to take the even more confounding route suggested through his dream of marrying Mary and himself assuming the responsibility of fatherhood for Jesus.

Cognitive neuroscience tells us that, whatever we might like to think, there is no such thing as a 'purely rational' decision: our first response to any situation – regardless of whether or not we are cognisant of it – is always rooted in the emotions. However the story of Joseph shows that these initial – and perfectly natural – responses do not have to be what dictates our subsequent actions. Once again then we have an example of how a willingness to both step back from reflex responses and move outside our frameworks of understanding – whether these be connected with presuppositions about privilege, specific understandings and expectations about events or with what constitutes a reasonable or legitimate way of behaving – opens up the possibility of developing richer understandings and more creative responses in the face of challenges. However – as our Advent readings have also indicated – this is not necessarily an easy path – and indeed is often a costly route to follow.

Response

Recall an time when a piece of news you received provoked a strong emotional reaction (positive or negative). Reflect on the extent to which your initial emotional responses determined your subsequent behaviour. How can we develop a practice which allows us to experience and own the inevitable (and perfectly natural) emotional responses which we have at certain moments but prevents these from dictating our subsequent reactions and actions in ways which may be unhelpful or destructive? What tools or skills might help us with this?

Prayer

May the peace of God –
the demanding peace of emotional engagement
the dangerous peace of imaginative action
the dynamic peace of Holy Dreaming

fill your hearts with joy,
your lives with courage,
and your world with change.
Amen.