

Sermons at All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Alison Heal on Sunday 21st December 2025

Bible passages: Matthew 1: 18-end and Isaiah 7:10-16

The gospel reading we've just heard is one we've been hearing around Christmas time for decades, probably since our childhood or teens, for most of us.

So I wonder if you can remember the kind of questions you asked about it: when you were an inquisitive child, if you were a sceptical teenager, maybe more recently too? I've had a lot of fun and enjoyment over recent years, taking my time digging into questions like this. So I thought that today we'd have a good dig through the kind of questions I asked about this reading from the first chapter of Matthew, and I hope that this might also answer some of your questions too.

First: in the genealogy at the beginning of this chapter of Matthew, which we didn't hear, why is it the family tree of *Joseph*, when the whole point is that Jesus *isn't* Joseph's biological son?

Next: if the Torah law stated that an adulterous woman should be killed (which it did), what was righteous about Joseph's decision to 'dismiss Mary quietly'? Wouldn't leaving her as a single mother leave her open to this judgement, whatever it says in the gospel about avoiding public disgrace? How could a *good* man do that?

Finally: Isn't the quote from Isaiah (the Old Testament reading which we just heard read to us) a reference to a young woman, not specifically to a virgin? Is Matthew making something of that prophecy which wasn't intended or prophesied?

You can catch a glimpse here of what an annoying teenager I probably was. But you can also probably see yourself or your own children, and maybe you've asked, or been asked similar questions.

Let's dig into the first one – why talk about Joseph's family tree when he's not Jesus' dad? I never actually looked into this one until I was researching this sermon, but some sensible answers weren't hard to find. This chapter really is all about Joseph, which is charming because Mary usually gets so much more attention. The simple answer to my question is that, when Joseph finalised his marriage to Mary, this was an official acceptance of her pregnancy, and adoption of her son, as his. It's as simple as that. His line, his heritage, became Jesus' heritage. It turns out that, as any family formed by adoption could tell you, your real parents are the ones who give you their name and their love. Jesus may not have had Joseph's DNA, but he was Joseph's heir to all the promises that came from being of the Line of David, Joseph's great ancestor. So the answer to that first question is simple: an adopted child is a full and true member of the family. I feel quite churlish to have been so focussed on DNA and genes.

Here's the second one. In this passage we're given a glimpse into Joseph's troubled state of mind, the turmoil he was thrown into when he thought his fiancée was pregnant with another man's child. He was, as Matthew states, a righteous man. I used to have a real discomfort about that word 'righteous' too. I don't know if it bugs you. In my mind it was too associated with 'self righteous', but in Joseph and Mary's Jewish heritage it was far from that meaning, having much more a sense of walking with God, than of 'proving how good I am'. So, I used to ask when I was a teenager, if Joseph was a good and Godly man, why would he put Mary at risk of public shaming, being ostracised or even death by stoning?

Whereas my first question reveals an overly biological emphasis on inheritance, I'd now say that my second question is overly simplistic in emotional terms. I wanted Joseph to be either good, or bad. Either he was a good guy who supported his woman in need, or he was a bad guy who cared more

about his own status than his fiancée's safety. But Joseph, like many characters in the Old and New Testaments, leads a much more complex, three dimensional life than I found comfortable. Just as reading novels is well known to develop empathy, reading the Bible can present us with humans facing dire situations, and instead of giving us simplistic answers it lets us live with them a little while, in their confusion. Joseph's ancestor David is one of these. And Joseph himself is another.

What is a good man to do, when plunged into shame, rejection, responsibility, disappointment and fear of judgement? Does he know the right course of action immediately? Does he robotically make a decision and put it into action? I don't think so. The brief account Matthew gives us is enough to imagine his emotional and ethical struggle when he discovered Mary was pregnant. Like anyone would, Joseph probably went through a low period which probably involved crying, ranting to a friend, overthinking everything and yelling a bit, in addition to prayer and rational thinking. No wonder he needed a clear message from God, who spoke to him in a dream, in order to make the right decision.

I wanted Joseph to be inhumanly perfect, or at least I didn't want the discomfort of sitting with him through his emotional and moral struggle to find the right course of action.

So, in asking those two questions, I learned something about myself, as well as learning more about God, the Bible and Joseph.

The final question is different, the question about this use of the words young woman, or virgin. It's one used by many rationalists who'd like to question Jesus' Virgin birth. So answering it risks putting me into conflict with agnostics, atheists and the more liberal Christian theologians, exemplified by David Jenkins, the former Bishop of Durham, whom most of us probably remember questioning both the virgin birth and the resurrection. I don't want to end up in a battle of facts vs faith with them, because I think that in this case, such a battle would involve misunderstanding the nature of prophecy.

Part of the question is, who is Isaiah talking about, when he says: 'the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the *young woman* is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel'? So is Matthew then misquoting, when he quotes Isaiah as saying: "Look, the *virgin* shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel'?

Lots of arguments between believers and atheists work in quite a superficial way. They use shallow, dissatisfying answers, which give a convenient reason to hold onto whichever view you want to hold onto. How do we move deeper, beyond the use of the word virgin and its precise meaning in these two contexts?

The first thing to note is that Isaiah was speaking God's prophetic word to a king who needed a bit of a kick into action, a king who wasn't too keen to listen to God, even though his kingdom was in danger. Isaiah's words are an immediate prophecy, as prophecies often are – something which challenges a particular person at a particular time. Unsurprisingly, a number of children are born following that prophecy, including one of Isaiah's own sons. It seems that, in immediate terms, that boy was the proof king Ahaz needed to start listening to God. But as we often say, 'history repeats itself', and many Old Testament prophecies have both that immediate, small scale fulfilment, and relevance to future events which will change the world. This is what Matthew is identifying when he uses Isaiah's prophecy in a new way, seeing in it a promise of Emmanuel, God with us.

Isaiah's prophecy goes on, beyond what we heard read, to talk about a new peace which will be established, 'On that day'. 'On that day' is a code phrase if you like, about something I preached about last month, the Day of the Lord, the day of judgement and of fulfilment of all God's promises. So it seems Matthew identifies the 'Now and not yet' nature of God's work, seeing the Isaiah

prophecy being fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, God with us, and also a promise of further fulfilment, in the way that, through Jesus, God will eventually put right all that is wrong in our world.

I hope this helps you to see how asking questions, and digging deep, can lead not only to head knowledge, but can deepen emotional maturity and faith in action, too. My three irritating teenager questions may have seemed shallow, combative and coldly intellectual. But by digging into the answers, prayerfully, intellectually and with emotional honesty, I've learned about Joseph, I've learned about Matthew, I've learned about myself, and I've learned about God.

The take-home message I've learned is that God is a part of our complicated, challenging, sometimes miserable lives. Matthew allows us to glimpse Joseph's struggle before he finally gets a clear answer from God. Matthew allows us to see the now and not yet nature of prophecy, where God gives words spoken long ago a fresh, and deeper meaning.

God's word entered human lives through prophets. God's word spoke to human lives through angels in visions and in dreams. God's word was conceived in Mary, and in the complex, fraught situation of an unexpected pregnancy, God met the needs of Mary and Joseph. God's word, God with us, was born of Mary, and in Jesus God meets the world's needs, today and in the future.