

“God-Is-With-Us”

The bible is wonderful. All life is there. Today’s Gospel is a case in point. The drama behind the words is worthy of a soap opera. The reading tells of Joseph’s turmoil at finding that Mary, the girl he was betrothed to marry, was pregnant - and he knew it was not his child. Now betrothal in terms of the time and culture was much more binding than engagement. It meant that the couple were actually married, but they had not yet come to live together, which simply means that Joseph had not yet brought his bride across the threshold of his house, formally taking her into his care and assuming responsibility for her from her father.

You remember the story of the ten bridesmaids; they were part of an elaborate ceremony by which the groom brings his wife to his home from her father’s finally sealing their union. The groom would formally call on the father and receive his daughter’s hand. There would be some feasting and celebration at the bride’s house with her family. Then the groom would parade his bride around the village, calling on everyone to rejoice with him. At each house the couple would receive the blessing of their neighbours and some food and drink and a gift. This could take some time, which is why, in the parable, the ten bridesmaids, who accompany the couple on their arrival at the groom’s home, wait so long and fall asleep. The bride and groom do not arrive until very late at night. Then the groom brings his wife into his home. In the tradition of the time, the wife is now under the protection of the groom and is, indeed, his property.

This tradition alerted everyone to the fact that the couple were now man and wife and were to be accepted as such by the community. Joseph had yet to arrange this ceremony of formal adoption of Mary as his wife when he discovered she was pregnant. He knew, of course, that he was not the father, so this was evidence of Mary’s adultery. We can imagine Joseph’s turmoil. His sense of betrayal would surely wrestle with his dismay and disbelief that this innocent, gentle, beautiful and demur girl could possibly have engaged in sexual congress with another man. But the evidence was irrefutable.

Adultery was technically punishable by stoning to death. That Joseph clearly loved Mary dearly meant that he could not possibly expose her to that

possibility and he was wrestling with how he could 'put her away quietly'. In fact, this would be difficult. There was only divorce and to take that option would not only open up speculation as to why Joseph would want to cut himself off from his new bride but would also condemn Mary to a lifetime of being ostracised and unmarriageable. This would mean she would have no means of support for her and her child and for, many women in that position, prostitution was the only option for survival.

A terrible dilemma for the just and good man Joseph. It was happily resolved by the appearance of the angel to let him know the extraordinary and incredible truth of Mary's conception and who the child was that she was bearing. Joseph, being a man of honour, was now prepared to take the shame of, apparently, having got his wife pregnant before their betrothal, but he weighed up that this was a small price to pay for facilitating the greatest event in the whole of human history.

For me, these bizarre circumstances around Jesus' birth are very significant. They establish the message and priorities of Jesus' mission and ministry and underline God's preferential option and love for the poor and disadvantaged. Our Saviour was born into a situation of human scandal with the spectre of illegitimacy and adultery hanging over his conception, and the circumstance of his birth, as a member of the royal family, in a filthy stable with no proper roof over his head, laid in a manger instead of an ornate cot, surrounded not by courtiers or even family, with no midwife, but only lowly animals and humble shepherds to witness the event.

In his later ministry Jesus continued this countercultural mission, eating with prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners, touching lepers, healing the sick who, according to the thinking of the day, were only to blame for their plight because of their sins. In the Gospel today Matthew reminds us that Jesus is Emmanuel, a name which means God-is-with-us, and this means he is with us, in Jesus, in all the circumstances of our lives, but most importantly, he is close to the sick, the sinner, the outcast and the broken-hearted, and he commends these to us too, not for our judgment, but for our love and care.