

The Joiner, the Star and the King

Life couldn't have been better! I had a good job. I built houses and repaired them—in fact any kind of work with wood. So I had plenty of orders. Business was good.

Even better, I was engaged to be married. She was young, she was lovely, and her name was Mary. I met her when I was working for a time in Nazareth. These were the happiest, most carefree days of my life. Little did I know then that things were about to change—and change forever. Not that there weren't happy days after that. There were. But carefree? No, I don't think I was ever carefree again.

The first I was aware that there was anything wrong was when Mary started acting strangely. She insisted she had to go to see her old relative Elizabeth and stay with her for a while. It was around the time that the amazing news came that Elizabeth, who'd never had any children, was now expecting! And Mary said she would like to go to help her. Now, Elizabeth and her husband Zacharias lived a good distance away—several days journey—in the hill country of Judea, not far from Jerusalem. It wasn't the kind of journey a young girl should make on her own and I wasn't able to leave a big job I was on. In the end her

father managed to arrange with some traders who were travelling that way that they would see she had been delivered safely. Her father could never really say no to her. Mind you, it was always difficult to say no to Mary. She knew her own mind.

In the end she was away three whole months until after Elizabeth's baby was born. I don't mind saying that it was a difficult time. I only managed to see her once in all that time, when I had to visit Jerusalem. She didn't look well. She looked too thin. She said she was OK, she'd just been a little sick that morning.

When she finally came back to Nazareth, she looked much better. In fact she had put on a bit of weight. But she was very serious and said we had to talk. What had happened? Surely she hadn't met someone else! Not my Mary!

We talked, and I couldn't believe what I was hearing. She said a lot about Zacharias meeting an angel in the Temple and about him being struck dumb because he didn't believe what the angel had to say. I don't blame him because the angel had said Elizabeth was to have a baby—and she was old! But I wasn't really concentrating on all that because I felt it was only preparatory to something Mary had to tell me. All this was leading up to something. And what a something! It was a bombshell.

At first I didn't get it. She said that she also had met with an angel—the great angel Gabriel no less—who said she too was to have a baby—a very special baby. I was amazed and delighted. I said I hoped we would be married soon and then we'd have lots of special babies.

But she just looked at me, and said, "Oh Joseph, you don't understand!" She was very nervous, nearly crying, but she took a deep breath and said, "Gabriel appeared to me here before I left for Judea. I am already expecting!"

I staggered and I very nearly fell. My heart nearly stopped beating. I felt stone cold. What was happening? My whole world was turning upside down.

I know now it was wrong, but I turned and walked to the door—more lurched really—and as I was going I said, "It's finished!" She cried, "Wait!" But just then her mother came to see what all the fuss was about, and I was gone.

I started running and I didn't stop till I was outside the town. I found myself at the top of the cliff on the edge of town. I looked down. It was the place where they used to stone people to death. They would throw them over the cliff and then stone them. Not so long ago that's what would have happened to Mary. My stomach churned at the thought. I felt like throwing

myself off. My heart was pounding and I felt dizzy. I sat down on the edge and I'm not ashamed to admit I cried.

What was I to do? Why had God allowed this to happen to us? Everything had been so perfect and now ... now it was all ruined ... all our dreams. What was I to do? I had to do the right thing. I couldn't just pretend nothing had happened. I would have to break off the engagement. It broke my heart even to think it, but it had to be done. It just wasn't right. If Mary had ... No! I could hardly imagine it, far less bring myself to say it. If Mary had been unfaithful to me ... it wouldn't be right for us to get married. If someone else had got her pregnant, well ... he should really look after her. That's when I started to get angry. Who was he? Who had done this? Who had stolen my girl from me? Now it all began to make sense—her acting strangely, her going off to Judea, the sickness, the weight gain—how could I have been so blind? I paced up and down on the edge of the cliff. Now I didn't feel like throwing myself down, I felt like throwing him down—that man, whoever he was. It was his fault my dreams were shattered.

Slowly I began to cool off. I shivered. It was getting chilly. I realised the sun had set and the darkness was deepening. It was just how I felt. But high above, the

stars had come out. One away to the south-west blazed brightly, but I paid it no heed. I dragged myself home along the silent streets with a heavy heart. I was weary—more shattered than after the hardest day's work sawing and hammering and dragging great beams of wood.

I crawled into bed, sure that I would never sleep. I tossed and turned, going over everything again and again. I remember thinking eventually that I would break off the engagement privately. It just needed two witnesses. I didn't want Mary to be publicly disgraced. Her parents could send her off back to Judea. No one need ever know.

I must have fallen into a dead sleep, because the next thing I knew I was dreaming. You know how it is. It feels real, but you know it's a dream. It was like that, only different. It was the most real dream I had ever had.

An angel of the Lord appeared and he was calling me by name. "Joseph, son of David," he said. No one had ever called me that. Of course we knew in our family that we were descended from King David—in fact I was descended in straight line from all the Kings of Judah. But it was not something we spoke about. It didn't do to draw attention to such things. There already was a King of Judea—Herod. He wasn't

descended from David, and he was a bit sensitive about that. Strictly speaking he wasn't even Jewish.

So I wondered why the angel addressed me so. Was it a title of honour, or was it some kind of portent of doom? In my dream I was excited and scared at the same time. I didn't have long to wait for the answer.

"Don't be afraid," he said, "to take Mary home as your wife." My heart gave a great leap. But then I thought, maybe this is just wishful thinking. It is just a dream!

But he wasn't finished. "Don't be afraid," he said, "because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." I hadn't a clue what he really meant. But all I knew was that Mary was innocent. She hadn't been with another man. Whatever was happening it was God's doing!

"She will give birth to a son," he said. I'd always wanted a boy, to teach my trade to, to work together with me—making things, building things, things that would last.

But he had one more thing to say, and it nearly blew my mind. "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." This was to be a special child—a unique child. Maybe the angel calling me son of David wasn't an accident. We were waiting for a great son of David who would set up

an everlasting kingdom. I wished then that I had paid more attention to what Mary had said—she said something about her having a special child.

And with that I woke up with a start. The sun was streaming in. I had overslept! People at the house I was working on would wonder what had happened to Joseph. I didn't care. I had to see Mary. I knew what I was going to do now.

I dashed down the street to her house. She looked like she hadn't slept a wink. She looked terrible, but to me she looked the most beautiful woman in the world. I said, "I'm sorry! I didn't know. I didn't understand. But I do now ... the angel. I'm sorry I didn't listen. I'm going to marry you ... if you'll have me! And I'm going to adopt him as my son." Her face changed in an instant from sadness to pure joy and she flew into my arms.

She said, "I was going to tell you. He said, 'Don't be afraid, Mary. You're going to have a baby boy, and you're to call him Jesus. He is the great Son of God. He will have King David's throne and his kingdom will last forever! The power of the Holy Spirit of God will do this.'"

And I said, "This is amazing! That's the same as the angel said to me!" We sat down and we talked and talked. We remembered things we had learned from the Psalms and the Prophets. We kept coming back to what

Isaiah had to say: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means ‘God with us’).

We got married and we set up home together, but we both agreed that we would live like an engaged couple until the baby was born.

If everything had gone to plan—our plan, that is—everyone would have known things weren’t right when the baby was born just six months later. Tongues would have started to wag in Nazareth. But as it turned out he wasn’t born in Nazareth at all. He was born south of Jerusalem in a little town called Bethlehem. And that was because the great Emperor sitting in Rome decreed that people all over the whole empire should be registered, and each one had to go to his home town. Now, my home town was Bethlehem, and we had to go there around the time the baby was due. God’s timing is perfect.

Although it might not have seemed like that to us at the time! I’ll not pretend it was other than a difficult time, what with the journey with Mary heavily pregnant, all our arrangements for accommodation falling through, and Bethlehem heaving with people all claiming some connection with the City of David. But in the end, everything turned out all right, although our son, Mary’s firstborn—his first cot was an animal’s

feeding trough! There was nowhere else, you see. And we named him Jesus.

But some amazing things happened then. The thing that sticks in my mind is this. It happened a few months later. We were still in Bethlehem. I didn't want to attempt the long journey back to Nazareth. We did manage the ten mile trip to Jerusalem after 40 days for Mary's purification, but a five day journey to Nazareth was a different matter. By this time I'd got a place for us to stay and I'd got some work. But one evening a strange thing happened. A caravan of very important strangers appeared in Bethlehem. I could tell from the number of camels they must be well off. Their gear was exotic. And the men—they were dressed in an outlandish way—they were from way out east.

It turned out they were stargazers. I was suspicious of them at first, because we don't approve of such things. But this is what they had to say:

They studied the heavens, and a few months before, they had seen a star rise in the sky which meant only one thing—that a new King had been born in the West—the King of the Jews. They explained it, but I didn't follow it all. They had come west, they said, with one purpose—to worship the new King.

I felt a shiver of excitement run up my spine at that, but I was wary. Why did they think that had

anything to do with us? Why had they come to Bethlehem, and to our house?

They said that of course at first they had gone to Jerusalem and made enquiries. Very quickly Jerusalem was in an uproar and King Herod heard of them and called them to his palace. I looked at them in amazement. It was a wonder they were still alive—asking about a new king in Herod's palace! And my suspicions doubled.

But they said Herod was very helpful and consulted his religious advisors and asked them where the Lord's Anointed was to be born. Of course they told him it was to be Bethlehem, as foretold by the prophet Micah. Then they said something that really got me worried. They said Herod was very interested and had secretly quizzed them about the exact time the star had appeared. He told them to go to Bethlehem and, when they had found the child, to return to him because he wanted to come and worship him too! By this time my mind was racing. Could it be true? Had Herod had a change of mind? This man who had every rival for this throne put to death—even his own wife and her sons? Did he really want to worship the Lord's Anointed King? Or was this just a ruse to secretly find the child to destroy him? Were these stargazers genuine or were they Herod's spies?

Anyway they wanted to see Jesus, so I let them in. As soon as they saw the child with his mother, an amazing thing happened that convinced me they were genuine—these important men bowed down to the ground and worshipped Jesus. And they produced gifts for him—expensive gifts—kingly gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Before they left, they took me aside and told me that, although Herod had told them to go back to him with the news, and the road north through Jerusalem was their direct route home, they all had a dream while they rested that afternoon warning them not to go back to Herod. So they were going to head south and get back east by a roundabout way.

My mind was in turmoil as I watched them moving off in the starlit night. We had to get away from here. Tomorrow we would set off for Nazareth, but that was fraught with danger—we would have to pass through Jerusalem. What if Herod's spies already knew where we were?

We tried to settle down for the night. I tossed and turned, like that night about a year before. Then just like that night, I dreamed. An angel of the Lord warned me to take Jesus and Mary and leave for Egypt. Herod was going to search for Jesus to kill him. My suspicions were correct!

I got up at once and told Mary. She started getting organised right away. But we nearly fell out over the packing. She wanted to take far too much stuff. In the end we had to leave most things apart from the essentials, like my tools—oh and the gold, frankincense and myrrh—that was going to come in handy—especially the gold. We set out in the middle of the night.

I looked up at the stars, and at one bright star that outshone the rest and I marvelled at the goodness of God revealing himself to those heathen stargazers in their own language—the language of the stars. I had told them all we knew—that Jesus was no ordinary king—he was the Son of God and he had come to save his people from their sins. They were amazed and delighted to hear that, and they went away talking earnestly among themselves. I rather hoped that there would be room for those pagan stargazers too among his people.

We heard later we hadn't left a moment too soon. Herod was livid when the stargazers didn't return as arranged. He sent his soldiers to Bethlehem with orders to kill every male child under two. He was going to make sure there would be no rival King of the Jews. He was a vicious, cruel man.

I say “was”, because we were down in Egypt for some time before we heard the news. I had managed to find work there. What buildings! But yes, it was there we heard the news that Herod was dead. While he lived his word was law, and people were terrified of him. Because he loved his own power, he rejected God’s Anointed King. But he couldn’t keep his throne forever. Like every one else, he had to face the judgement of God.

He had murdered all his rivals. But there was One he couldn’t kill. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom.

When I tell people of these things I often ask them: Heathen stargazers freely worshipping or Herod clinging to his tawdry kingdom—who do you stand with?

Matthew 2

Luke 1