

TWO CONTRASTING BUT COMPLEMENTARY APPROACHES TO CHRISTMAS

A) Listen and Hear Joseph Speak to You. (Read Matthew 1:18-25)

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I want to talk with you, and I hope you can hear me across two thousand years. I will try and share my experience with you because no one was affected by that first Christmas more than me and who knows, this may help you too. As you know, for me it began in great darkness. when I received what seemed to be the worst possible news. You may believe this or not. but I was never fully convinced that Mary had betrayed me. Of course, I was really devastated and didn't know what to believe. At times I found temporary relief in my work because busy hands can provide the troubled mind with a brief reprieve. Still, I was not certain that Mary had betrayed me, even though I could not accept her story. We ancient people may have lacked your scientific knowledge, but in some ways we were more in touch with the world than you. I knew no one would believe Mary's crazy story. Why else would I have decided to divorce here instead of marrying her?

Does that decision confuse you? You know all about marriage and divorce in your time, so far removed from mine, but here is something new to even you; divorce before marriage. Respectable Jews of my time had a period of betrothal before marriage, something like your period of engagement, except it was very serious. Betrothal almost equalled marriage but without sexual union. For a Jewish maiden like Mary, betrothal lasted a year. During this time, she was legally mine as if we were married. If had died that year she would have been considered a widow.

I decided the best thing for us was a quiet divorce. This would protect my honour and might save her life. A Jewish woman convicted of adultery could be put to death through stoning. We had very different laws for women than men. Since only men were thought to be members of God's covenant with Israel, women had the legal status of property. This does not mean there was no love between husbands and wives (although often there was not) but I loved Mary. How I loved Mary! I had lived a very lonely, solitary life and had never opened my heart to another. Then, one day this beautiful girl came into my life and what a miracle that was for me! I never knew I had such depths in me as she uncovered. Her face, her voice, her eyes penetrated to the centre of my being. I found missing parts of myself in her. Our life together would be a true marriage. Now this disaster! I was torn apart. How do you take one who possesses your very soul and condemn her to die? No, we would part and pray that God would grant each of us grace to begin again.

Then my world was transformed by a dream. Anyone who knows me can tell you I am no dreamer. I am a carpenter, a practical man. I had never dreamed of angels. Even now, I have no words to describe the experience but I'll try. An angel of God came to

me, and assured me that Mary's story was true. I have never known such relief and the storm in my heart was calmed. Could it be? God was giving Mary back to me! Perhaps the greatest joy we can know is the joy of restoration, of having some lost treasure returned to us. When the dream was over and I awoke, could not stop weeping!

It was a while before I remembered the rest of the angel's message, **"You shall call his name Jesus, for He will save his people from their sins"** The angel used words that I had heard all my life, taken from the great Prophet Isaiah. **"Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (God-is-with-us)"** Recalling this had a sobering effect on my excitement. Having Mary returned to me was not the only gift that was being given. The child Mary was carrying was the long-awaited Messiah! The angel had said **"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife into your home"** Did the Heavenly Father want me to serve as the child's father?

All of this is why I play such a major role in your celebration of Christmas. I was mid-wife to Jesus' birth in that stable in Bethlehem and greeted the shepherds and later the wise men. In your nativity scenes, I am always close by. Can you imagine what it means to me when somebody says, **"Mary and Joseph"**. You know very little about me beyond this, but I was there to watch him grow. I taught him to use his hands and my tools. I gave him some of his first lessons in the ways of the world and many lessons about the ways of God. How I would be filled with joy to hear him called **"the son of Joseph"**.

Yes, it was all a sacred honour. However, with every Blessing of God comes an equal responsibility. Like my entire Hebrew nation, I had looked for the Messiah to come as a new King David, a warrior-king. We watched the horizons for the magnificent figure. We listened for his victory cry from the temple in Jerusalem. We would never have sought him where I found him on that night of nights. Nothing is more awkward, traumatic or hazardous than the process of human birth. We enter the world so vulnerable! What God would condescend to such a demeaning ordeal? In the long list of pagan gods, none of them give up their power or transcendence to become infant mortals. Would the God of the universe become as weak and exposed as Mary's new-born child? Could God love us enough to join us in our humanity and become one of us?

As dear as these and hundreds of memories are to me, we must not overstay at the manger. The Word became flesh and was placed in these rough hands of mine, but Christmas is not a final destination. It was just a starting point! You must go to the Jordan where at his Baptism. his Father spoke a blessing over his head. You must follow him to Galilee and sit at his feet and listen. You must go to an upper room in Jerusalem, to dark Gethsemane, to darker Golgotha, and to the borrowed tomb of another Joseph. You must stay until you see and understand the empty tomb. Then you must let his Spirit lead you all the days of your life! My life is over and I'm fading fast. I'm in the special care of Mary and Jesus, but I had to tell you my story before I depart this earth.