

Christmas 2020

What are you hoping to do this Christmas? Sadly, our options are much more limited than they usually are and there are challenges which we have to face. Thinking about these things and what to say about them, made me think about the challenges the Holy Family faced in the lead up to that first Christmas, the birth of the Child and what came afterwards.

Mary was espoused to Joseph. Espousal is a stronger commitment than engagement, but it is not yet marriage. No doubt she was thinking excitedly about her wedding day and her future as Joseph's wife, when everything was changed for her and for Joseph. *In the sixth month (of Mary's cousin Elisabeth's pregnancy) the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David and the virgin's name was Mary. Mary was to become the Mother of the Son of God. Impossible to believe, but with God nothing shall be impossible. Mary accepted God's Will for her life, saying, Be it unto me according to thy word.*

And so it was, but it was very hard for Joseph to understand or to accept. *Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. What do you think he should have done? What happened was that the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and reassured him. That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS.* The angel explained that the birth of Mary's child was the fulfilment of a prophecy that the child would be Emmanuel, which means *God with us* – good to know as we face up to life's challenges. We are never alone. God is with us and always ready to hear our prayers through Jesus.

The problems of Mary and Joseph were, however, far from over. The Holy Land was part of the despotic and ruthless Roman Empire. *And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. Everyone had to go back to the family home to pay their taxes. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.* It's a long way over rough roads from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The Bible doesn't even mention that they had a donkey. The donkey may or may not have existed. It was a hard journey for a heavily pregnant woman. She must have endured great discomfort and Joseph must have been very anxious. *While they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.* No hospital; you wouldn't have expected a hospital in those days. Not the relative comfort and security of her own home, where presumably most babies were born at that time. Not even the hospitality of an inn. *She brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger.* If you're a mother or a father, just think about it.

It must have been very dramatic when the shepherds arrived with their story of having been sent by angels *a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace goodwill towards men.* Sometimes, on Christmas night, I think of that scene as though it were played out over the fields of our own parish, a revelation to receive deep into our souls. *Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.*

Some time later, the Holy Family had moved into a house in Bethlehem. Guided by a star, *there came wise men from the East. They brought Sacred gifts of mystic meaning; Incense doth their God disclose, Gold the King of Kings proclaimeth, Myrrh his sepulchre foreshows.* What an impression that must have made. But the wise men had called first at Jerusalem, where the tyrannical and paranoid King Herod reigned. Scenting a rival, Herod devised a plan to kill the infant Christ. Warned in a dream by an angel, *when he (Joseph) arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt.* The Holy Family became refugees and Herod's soldiers killed the remaining baby boys in Bethlehem. It is a wicked world and we desperately need a Saviour. Thank God for Jesus, *God with us.*

Owing to COVID, our only Christmas services this year will be Holy Communion at 8.00 am at St John's Halling & 9.30 am at St Michael's Cuxton on Christmas Day. Otherwise, we're meeting on Sundays at 9.30 am at Cuxton & 11.00 am at Halling. Please keep in touch. Let me know if I can help in anyway, including prayer requests. You can find our information on my webpage – <http://cuxtonandhalling.org.uk> or call 01634 717134. Every blessing, Roger.