

A Fiancé's Story

We have two Gospels which speak about the time before Jesus' birth: Matthew and Luke. It seems certain that neither of them could, or did, tell the story of those days as they actually happened; and the two stories won't coexist in historical terms. This year, for instance, reading Matthew, we find that Jesus is born at home in Bethlehem, where Joseph is the resident carpenter. There is no Archangelic visit to Mary, and the meditative dialogue between heaven and earth which Luke gives us in the Annunciation is completely unmentioned. Instead, the whole question is transferred to Joseph's mind, and the dialogue happens in a dream that is born out of agony, not meditation.

A Dreaming Young Man Called Joseph

Just a minute - the bells are ringing in the servant's quarters; I've heard that before. "Joseph the dreamer", whose knowledge of dreams saved his people's lives: didn't he do some rather influential interpreting in Egypt for Pharaoh? The guy who was sold as a slave to foreigners, cut off from the rest of his brothers - all Eleven of them - and given out as a dead man? Who then reappeared in their story as the Saviour of the Nation, giving them food when they were at the point of death? At one end *they're* all at *his* throat, plotting his death because he's Daddy's favourite boy, and at the other they're on their knees before him, because they know *he* now has power of life and death over *them*.

Joseph Or Jesus?

Why should Jesus' father remind us of another Joseph, whose life is strangely like the life of Jesus, the unborn baby who is already tearing the heart of the Carpenter of Bethlehem to tatters? Intellectually it hardly makes sense. But remember, this is all in the dream-world, where wires keep getting tangled and crossed. Joseph of Genesis was a providential man, rejected by his family, impaled on hatred and sin, condemned to death by jealous and frustrated people because they couldn't possess his beauty. And Joseph of Bethlehem has all that turmoil and shapelessness to impart. He's ready to throw away his life with Mary, because he hasn't realised that he is caught up in a divine plan, in Providence. *He is thinking as men think, not like God.* Isn't that the state of Peter, when Jesus says to him *Get behind me*

Satan? Certainly Joseph of Bethlehem is *an obstacle in Jesus' path* as he resolves, makes up his mind to do this. Then comes the dream. It's revelation; it's an angel. Joseph is now let in on the secret: he has the power to *think like God, and not like a man.* In this changed state, he does two things: first, he wakes up. Second, he does what an angel told him to do, and takes Mary home as his wife.

Word Becomes Flesh

At that moment, something vital and extraordinary happens. A "fatherless" child - which is what Jesus would have been had Joseph not had his dream - inherits a name and a family. If you want to see what family he inherits, Matthew will tell you in the first seventeen verses of his Gospel. It is the family of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob - *and Joseph the dreamer* - and David and Solomon, and King Ahaz who is in the first reading this Sunday, and all those human beings who made up the story of God and Israel before he was born. All of that inheritance hung in the balance as the Carpenter struggled with his feelings, and tried to do the right thing. It was only when he himself received a revelation - his dream - that he rose to be a true son of Abraham, and took his own place in the providential line of David, who was promised an heir who would make his throne eternal. The dream-angel calls Joseph *Son of David*, even though his dad was called Jacob: because the whole story of the Bible hinged on Joseph's decision. You can therefore say that, when Joseph decided to accept Jesus, the whole genealogy - all those *words* - became flesh, so that the people of Jerusalem would one day sing *Hosanna to the Son of David!* when Jesus entered the gates.

What Price History?

In the light of all that meaning, the question about history pales into insignificance. Down the ages God has insisted on depending on his creatures; he has saved us with our collaboration, or not at all (*without Him, we cannot; without us, He will not*). What Matthew tells us, in the story of this anguished lover, is that the Incarnation, that divine and glorious consummation of the human mystery, can only happen when we agree. We can only do this by a massive act of faith; because what it will make of us, we do not, cannot, yet know. *Fr Philip*