



Sermon preached by Dr Augur Pearce on 21st December 2025

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Advent IV

Matthew 1 : 18-25 (AV)

Until Parliament, on the proposal of Lord Chancellor Hardwicke, began to change the English rules about marriage in 1753, it was well understood that there were two stages in bringing a marriage into being: contract and solemnization.

Contract was the stage at which two people agreed that each would take one another as spouse, with immediate effect. There might be promises expressed in words, but even if there were not this 'taking' implied matrimonial obligations – to live together, to be faithful, to support and be good to one another and so on. Those promises were called, in Latin, *sponsalia*, from which the English words 'spouse' and 'espoused' come.

All that was necessary to become 'espoused' was the exchange of such words in the present tense. 'I take you as my husband', 'I take you as my wife'. Provided it could be proved that such words had been said, nothing more was needed – no legal preliminaries, no special venue, no witness with special qualifications.

However, there were a range of legal effects for which the second stage – solemnization – was needed. This meant the existence of the marriage had to be publicly acknowledged, so others would know about it. At the very least a person in holy orders had to be present, and ideally solemnization was supposed to take place in the parish church before a congregation, with advance notice and worship and teaching designed for the occasion. Unless the marriage was solemnized, it would not, for example, produce the typical effects on the spouses' property which played so large a part in the marriage relationship of those days.

These two stages could take place together, so that no contract was made until the service which solemnized the marriage. Then words in the service such as 'I Jack take you Jill to be my wedded wife' killed two birds with one stone. They constituted the contract, but they also made it public. But there was an alternative: the two stages could be separated: a relatively private and informal contracting to start, with the intention to solemnize at a later date. So sometimes it happened that solemnization never took place; the question would then arise whether the couple, who had simply contracted marriage – those who were merely 'espoused' – were bound to one another or not.

The answer in the middle ages and in early modern England was that they were. To be espoused was to be 'married in the sight of God'. Solemnization was a human addition and not necessary to the 'core' of marriage. If you were espoused you were committed. You were already husband and wife, you could not go back on it, you could not marry anyone else and if you slept with anybody else it was adultery. And this was so even if you had not yet slept with each other. Consummation of the marriage was not an essential stage in creating such obligations.

In this respect English law, developing under the strong influence of the Christian clergy, reflected the law of Moses. The Old Testament knows nothing of solemnization: bridegrooms 'take' their brides and 'know' them – so there is contract and consummation, since one isolated passage gives scope to argue that the bride must agree to go with the husband – the 'taking' must be mutual. But the regulation of these things in Deuteronomy 23 [23-29] makes clear that the obligations of marriage, in particular the strong obligation of fidelity, begin from betrothal or espousal. Carnal knowledge is not needed to place those obligations on the parties.

Why on earth have I begun this sermon with an exposition of English law in the mid-eighteenth century? Because it makes it somewhat easier to follow what is being said in the first chapter of Matthew, which we have just heard; and I'm grateful to Andrew for reading that passage from the Authorised Version, because it uses precise language that would have been familiar to the English hearer when that translation of the Bible first appeared. 'When as [Jesus'] mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.'

The couple in that account were already espoused. They had already agreed to take one another as husband and wife. So they *were* husband and wife, even though there had been no consummation: they had not 'come together'. The Mosaic law saw them as already committed. They could begin cohabitation whenever it suited them. And when the passage says that Joseph was 'not willing to make [Mary] a publick example', it refers to the treatment prescribed in Deuteronomy for an unfaithful spouse. The commitment between them had already reached the level which could expose Mary to being stoned as an adulteress, at least if the Roman administration in Nazareth had permitted this. Mary was already Joseph's wife. Which is, I'm afraid, the answer to well-meaning modern attempts to suggest Jesus was the child of an unmarried mother.

So we turn to the more important aspect of the passage – that Mary's child was 'of the Holy Ghost'. Jesus was not the son of some third party with whom Mary had had a fling on the side. But he was not Joseph's child either. This has led Christians down the ages to stress Mary's virginity in their creeds, in hymns like the one we sang a moment ago, and in almost every reference to her. There are arguments about whether Mary ever ceased to be a virgin, and whether one should take literally later Gospel references to Jesus' brothers; but those are a distraction. Matthew suggests Mary was a virgin at the moment when Jesus was conceived. What is often called the doctrine of the virgin birth is really about the virginal *conception* of Jesus: and it is a story with a very definite purpose.

Before coming to that purpose, it is also worth noting that the virginal conception story is not common to all of early Christianity. Of course Mary says to the angel in Luke 1: 'I know not a man'. But if Jesus' family and neighbours had known of this pointer to a supernatural origin they would have been unlikely to be so sceptical about him as were the 'brethren' of John 7:5. or the local community in Mark 6:3. Paul too might not have referred to Jesus as 'of the seed of David according to the flesh' (Romans 1:3). And a virginal conception story, if generally accepted by the first Christians, would probably have been invoked much more often than it actually was in those early arguments about Jesus' divine nature.

The Matthew-tradition also sees in the virginal conception a fulfilment of Isaiah 7 [14], but the Hebrew text of that prophecy referred simply to a young woman conceiving a child named 'God-with-us', 'Emmanuel'. It is only in the later Greek version that the prophecy began to refer to a 'virgin'. It seems more likely, though, that the author of Matthew was already convinced of Mary's virginity before he started to look for confirmation in existing Scripture.

It is also important to appreciate the virginal conception is not there to support the distaste Augustine of Hippo felt in the fifth century for sex in any shape or form. That was a later injection of classical asceticism into Christian morality. By any Biblical reasoning it would not have been wrong for Joseph and Mary to have slept together. To follow Augustine too closely is to shift the point of the story from what it says about Jesus to what it might imply about Mary and Joseph.

Because I suggest the real thrust of the story lies in what it says about Jesus – that he was not just a human being as human paternity might have made people think, that he was also the

incarnate Word, or Wisdom, or indeed Son of God. Many scriptural passages, whether or not they are factual, are also preserved in order to get across a deeper truth. The truth here is that God came in Jesus to stand alongside us, to share the human condition without himself ceasing to be God.

I know I am speaking here in a church with varied attitudes to the miraculous. Some people have to cope particularly hard with scepticism at seasons like Advent and Christmas. The virginal conception or 'virgin birth' is a tricky one for many. But let me sum up what I have tried to say so far. The story is not about Mary and Joseph living together unmarried: we may today feel considerable understanding for people who do that, but we can't conscript the Christmas story in their support. The story is also not about sex being in any way bad or tainting in itself. The story was not made up by Matthew or Luke in order to fit a mistranslated version of the Book of Isaiah. And the story does not seem to have been known by all those who knew Jesus in his lifetime. But some people knew the tradition, some probably took it literally, and others felt it served a purpose which made it worth including in the tale of Jesus' birth whether literal or not. That purpose, and the reason why our creeds and hymns and religious language generally speak of Jesus as 'born of the Virgin Mary', is to emphasise that in him we saw, and continue to experience, God who 'was in the beginning with God' but is also 'God with us', the one who was uniquely equipped 'to save his people from their sins' and who still does so today.