

Based on Matthew 1&2; Luke 1

A Birth in Bethlehem

The scene was set over Bethlehem. The small, sleepy town was about to play host to the greatest awakening of all time. In a dark, dusty cave, a tired couple fell to the straw, exhausted by the journey and the night. The place was little more than a shed, a few slats of wood fronting a cave set in the hills.

Mary whispered: I'm so tired...
Joseph replied: Don't worry; I'll make a bed.

Their voices were strained, their throats dry from the travelling and their bodies weary from the long day. Joseph busied himself with a makeshift bed of hay and blankets.

Mary: I think the baby's coming... Joseph! I can't - not here!
Joseph: We'll be all right - you'll be all right, we'll get through it somehow...
Mary: You might! But will I... And the baby... it's so dirty here...
Joseph: Lie down. Here, there's a bed of straw, it's clean. Come on.

Joseph Proposes, Mary is Pregnant

It had not always been this way - Joseph so supportive and concerned. Mary's pregnancy was no ordinary occurrence and when Joseph first heard of it nine months ago he was far from the willing partner.

Joseph: Mary - my beloved, I'd like you to... No, that's no good. Can't say that. Think, think. How do people propose? I know! Mary, my love, I want you to... No, that won't do either. My dearest Mary? No I can't say that! Mary! Will you marry me? Marry me! No, no, no. I definitely can't do it like that. Mary... Will you be my wife?

Mary, on her way to break the difficult news to Joseph, faltered in the doorway as she overheard this. She dropped her head and turned to leave. Joseph realised she was there and hurried over.

Joseph: Oh... Mary... I... I've something to marry you... I mean, something to tell you.
Mary: Yes, I heard.
Joseph: Mary, I want to... I mean - I'd like to... or rather, I want you to... well, will you? Be my wife, I mean.
Mary: Joseph, please listen to me first. Something's happened. Something that may make you change your mind.
Joseph: What do you mean?
Mary: I mean... I mean... I'm pregnant.

There was a pause as the idea slowly sank in.

Joseph: But I...
Mary: Look, I know what you must think.
Joseph: I'm sorry, I don't think I understood you. For a minute then I thought you said...
Mary: I'm pregnant.
Joseph: Yes... that's what I thought you said!
Mary: Listen Joseph...

Joseph: But how could you? I mean, you and me, we're supposed to be... Well, you never said anything. How could you do something like that? And what about your mother - does she know?

Mary: Joseph, listen to me. It's not what you think.

Joseph: Do I know him? The father, I mean, do I know him?

Mary: You could say that, yes.

Joseph: Good friend of the family, is he?

Mary: Joseph, please...

Joseph: And what about God? I don't suppose you've even considered Him in all of this? You do realise He knows? You can't hope to hide it from Him, you know.

Mary: Oh yes, He knows all about it, Joseph.

Joseph: Well, I'm glad somebody does...

Mary: You see - He is the father.

Joseph: What?

Mary understood little of this herself. All she knew for sure was that God had promised her a child, and that this child would be unique, ruling over the house of Jacob forever.

Mary: God is the father of my child, Joseph. Or perhaps I should say - I am the mother of His son. There's no other man involved - it's God, His Spirit I suppose. That's all.

Joseph: And this... child?

Mary: He's going to be the Messiah, Joseph. We're to call him Jesus. Can you believe it - our child, the Messiah!

Joseph: I don't know, I don't know if I do believe it? You say - 'Our child' but it isn't, it's not mine anyway. Not if it's God's.

Mary: No. But He has chosen us - both of us, to bring up His Son.

Joseph: But the disgrace, what about my reputation, my family, my friends? What will they say? And what about you - once you start to show... well it's unthinkable. You know what people will say - and what they'll do! It'll be dangerous for you to just go out of the door. This is disastrous.

Mary: I don't think it is. I'm scared, Joseph. Just like you. But I can't stop this now. No one can. I've decided. Now it's up to you. It's your choice, Joseph.

Mary looked at him long and hard. She loved this man dearly, and had longed for the day when they would be married. Now all of that seemed to be slipping away, out of her limited reach. She turned and left him.

Joseph: Mary! Wait! Give me some time. This is such a shock! Mary! Please!

Joseph ran out into the bright daylight, but she had moved swiftly and the dusty brushing of her heels against the street was already fading into the distance.

Now here they were, miles from home in Bethlehem, come to register for the Roman Census, and barely a corner of the town free in which to lay their heads for the night. Meanwhile, on the hills above the town...

The Shepherds

Jake: Luke, are all the sheep safe?

Luke: Dunno.

Eli: Well go off and check 'em Luke, make sure they're all there... Off you go, that's a good lad. Of course, you know what'll happen. He'll

get to fifteen and fall asleep again. Same thing, every night, he never learns does he?

Jake: Poor lad. Shepherding's not a bad life – but I'm not sure he's cut out for it...

Luke: Lads, lads, have you seen what's going on up there?

Eli: Not them vultures again is it?

Jake: If it is they got very big harps and they've learnt to sing.

Eli: Sing?

Luke: Aye. Come with me I've got a shock for you. Look!

Eli: My goodness! Them's not vultures - them's...

Luke and Jake: Yes?

Eli: Angels!

Jake: Wow! You're kidding!

Luke: What's an angel?

Eli: A spiritual being believed to be a celestial attendant or messenger of the omnipotent deity.

Jake: Pardon?

Eli: One of God's assistants.

Luke: Ooh listen - what's that they're singing about?

Jake: Sounds like 'Glory to God in the forest'. Why forest?

Luke: No, it's glory to 'God in the Highlands', must be something to do with the hill dwellers.

Eli: No you daft dollop of sheep's doin's, they're singing highest. 'Glory to God in the highest', and if I'm not mistaken... aye, they're singing about a new baby what's been born.

Luke: Oh great I love babies, let's go find him.

Jake: Oh sure, that should be easy, after all there's only been about fourteen million new babies born tonight.

Eli: Hang on they ain't finished yet, they're singing about him being... I don't believe it.

Luke: What?

Eli: Well, unless I'm much mistaken...

Luke: Yes?

Eli: Well they seem to be singing about him being in an animal trough. Poor little mite.

Jake: Shouldn't be too difficult to spot then.

Luke: Perhaps he's been abandoned there.

Eli: No, listen. 'Peace on earth', that's what they're singing now. Aye, I think we'd better go find this baby, see what's going on. Come on lads. Oops! Careful where you're treading now...

The shepherds left the hillsides and, their flocks forgotten, came stumbling into the town, searching for the mysterious child. When they found him he was indeed wrapped in rags and lying in an animal trough. In hushed amazement they came in, gazed in silence then ran into the night, stopping regularly to tell everyone they met about the wonder of the new child. As one Shepherd returned home...

A Shepherd Tells His Mother

Luke: Ma, Ma! You're not going to believe this!

Luke's mother was a wise old bird. Not easily ruffled, or indeed, hoodwinked.

Mother: Luke, do you know what time it is?

Luke: Ma, come here. Come here. Look, look!

Mother: Where are you?

Luke: Out here, on the step. Look at that sky! Look at that sky!
 Mother: Very nice, now do you want a snack before you turn in?
 Luke: Mum! The sky!
 Mother: We're all out of figs but I could do you your favourite – fish and grapes.
 Luke: That star, Ma. Look - I've seen him.
 Mother: Him? Him?
 Luke: The Messiah! That's his star; he's in a stable.
 Mother: The Messiah, in a stable? Come on, Luke, you've had a hard day...
 Luke: He's a beautiful baby boy, Mum. Scrunched blue eyes and no teeth!
 Mother: Sounds like your father.
 Luke: Ma! I'm serious. He's amazing!
 Mother: And I suppose He's got a nice gold cot and a purple nightshirt with a big 'M' on the front!
 Luke: Mum! Listen, will you...
 Mother: Mind you, all this talk of babies makes me wonder about your cousin, she shouldn't have gone to register in that state. I hope she's not had it yet. She didn't need to go... Joseph's the one they want.
 Luke: Ah! That's the other thing, Mum. I've seen Mary too...
 Mother: What!
 Luke: And she is all right.
 Mother: You've seen her – in the town - in Bethlehem? She's safe then?
 Luke: Oh yes. She was in er... she was in... The stable.
 Mother: 'The Stable'? Don't think I know that one, dear, is it an inn?
 Luke: No, not exactly. It's not 'The Stable' so much as 'a stable'.
 Mother: A... stable... a stable... with cattle and sheep? And... dung! Look at your feet!
 Luke: Exactly. Sit down, Ma.

The Wise Men

Meanwhile, somewhere in the East, thousands of miles away, three wise men were watering their camels. Studying the movement of the planets they had been struck by an extraordinary phenomenon.

Balthasar: You know, I'm sure I had it here somewhere.
 Melchior: What are you looking for now?
 Balthasar: The map! I'm sure I had it, honestly. I put it in when I packed the Frankincense...
 Gaspar: Oh no, don't say you've forgotten the presents as well!
 Balthasar: No, no, of course not... look - here's the incense. Whoops! No, that's my underarm body-balm.
 Melchior: Twelve months! Twelve months we've been on the road.
 Balthasar: Eleven.
 Melchior: What?
 Balthasar: It's eleven actually, eleven months and thirty days. It's only the 24th today, 25th tomorrow, then it'll be twelve months. You know, I think we might have taken a wrong turn somewhere.
 Gaspar: How can you take a wrong turn following a star?
 Balthasar: True. At least we can rely on that star.
 Melchior: Thank goodness for that star.
 Gaspar: You can say that again, can't go wrong there...
 Melchior: Wait a minute, what are you two doing? It's this one - isn't it?
 Gaspar: Is it? I thought it was this one!
 Balthasar: No, it's this one!
 Melchior: Next time an expert in astronomy might come in handy.

Balthasar: I think you mean astrology.
Gaspar: Isn't it archaeology?
Balthasar: No! Be quiet! Anyway, what do you mean - next time? There won't be a next time - this is an historic occasion - the King of kings an' all that. Which reminds me, I had a dream last night.

Melchior: Another one?
Balthasar: Actually it was very funny. You'll never guess what happened.
Melchior: Correct. I won't.
Balthasar: Oh come on, guess. You'll love it, it's hilarious.
Melchior: Okay - you dreamt that it took us a whole two years to find the King.
Balthasar: Oh, be serious... Okay I'll tell you. I dreamt... I dreamt... You'll love this... I actually dreamt that a bunch of stupid shepherds found him before we did.

Melchior: That's not funny - it may be true.
Balthasar: Oh, don't be ridiculous. This is the King we're talking about. He wouldn't make himself available to any old riff raff, would he? I mean - shepherds, they'd leave a nasty trail on his carpet. And how would they ever get in his palace. No, mate. It takes wise men to find him. Not simple folk.

Melchior: Well, perhaps we should have brought a wise man with us then?
Balthasar: Very funny. Strange dream though - it all seemed to be in a stable. Ugh, yes, I remember now. A dirty old shed, it was. Isn't it funny how dreams can be so distorted? Must've been that camel's cheese.

Melchior: Might be the truth.
Balthasar: WHAT! The King of Kings - born in a cattle shed - amongst all that... muck! What kind of king is that?

Melchior: A very unusual one, I guess. With no high and mighty aspirations - unlike one or two people I could mention.

Gaspar: Careful!
Melchior: Just explaining that's all. He obviously wants to be accessible to ordinary people.

Balthasar: Ah, but if he's that accessible, then why's it taken us twelve months to get lost behind this star. I mean that star.

Gaspar: Yes! They call us wise men.
Melchior: Ah well, there's wisdom and there's wisdom.
Balthasar: Oh well that's cleared that one up then!
Melchior: What I mean is - if he really has come for ordinary folks, then we'd better make sure we're not too wise to go looking for him. A king who comes to simple people can be a bit much for the wise to swallow...

Gaspar: But what about these gifts then? They won't be much good to a peasant king!

Melchior: Oh I think they'll be all right.
Gaspar: What? Gold, frankincense and myrrh? It's a strange mixture.
Melchior: Well... I get the feeling this is no ordinary baby.
Balthasar: You get a feeling? From a star!
Melchior: This one's different, believe me.
Gaspar: Yes but why gold, Frankenstein and myrrh?
Balthasar: Gold because he's a king.
Gaspar: And the Frankenstein?
Balthasar: Frankincense! It's what they use in temples, it's religious. And I reckon he's gonna be a great spiritual leader.

Melchior: Fair enough, but not myrrh. That's a spice for putting on dead bodies.
Balthasar: Perhaps his death will be significant.
Melchior: You're death'll be significant in a minute.

Balthasar: Come on. That star's on the move again, and I think we've got a long way to go yet...
Melchior: Isn't it this way?
Gaspar: Or this way?
Balthasar: No! Concentrate!

And so the wise men continued on their journey – a voyage across a vast continent that would take them two years and ultimately result in the death of numerous children.

Simeon and Anna – Jesus is Circumcised

When Jesus was eight days old Mary and Joseph took him to the Temple to be circumcised, as was the custom. As they stood in the Temple courts an old man named Simeon approached them, his eyes wide and sparkling with anticipation. He took the child and said,

Simeon: I have waited and waited for this moment. Like a tree growing and twisting, being battered and weathered by the storms of a lifetime – yet this moment makes it all worthwhile. Lord, I can die in peace now, now that I have seen this child. The deliverer – the saviour. Who would have thought that a tiny fragile baby like this could be the salvation for everyone? But my eyes have seen it, and still see it. A living, crying, breathing gift from God.

He held the baby aloft, his old eyes wet with tears, and then he turned to Mary and Joseph.

Simeon: This child will be a mixed blessing to you. Some will love him – others will hate him. And their hatred will be a white-hot blade piercing your souls. But it will all be for the good – no one will be able to stand before this man and pretend. No one. He is the embodiment of truth – and he will be the success and the failure of many. You are blessed.

Joseph: Blessed!
Simeon: Oh yes.
Mary: But you just predicted trouble for us...
Simeon: Not trouble – conflict – there's a difference.

At that moment an old prophetess called Anna approached. She had been living in the Temple for decades – fasting and praying.

Anna: Praise God!
Joseph: What now?
Anna: I've been in this Temple for years – but I've never seen anything like this.
Joseph: We've just brought our child to be circumcised...
Anna: Just? Just!? But this is no ordinary child – look! He's the pride of Israel – he's the child of the nation! The whole world will glory in him one day. Praise God! Look, everyone, look! The baby!
Simeon: You'll not stop her now. She's been waiting too. She'll tell everyone.
Mary: But we don't want a fuss!
Simeon: Your whole life will be a fuss from now on. This is just the beginning. God bless you both. You've made a weary man very happy.

Simeon and Anna slipped away and left them. Mary and Joseph took the boy and moved into a rented house for his early childhood. Eventually the wise men from the east came sweeping out of the night and arrived, banging on their front door with torches, servants and bags of

treasure. But they made one mistake; they visited the local king and told him of the powerful new baby. Soon the streets were swimming with soldiers, the night air thick with the stench of newborn blood. King Herod sent a task force to wipe out every child under the age of two. But he failed. One baby disappeared into the night with his parents. One baby made it safely to Egypt, where he stayed until the mighty Herod was dead.