

Meditation on Matthew 1:18-25.

Voice of Joseph towards the end of his life.

It was the first time I'd been without family. In Nazareth there was always someone about I was related to, even if it was just a brother-in-law's cousin. Of course Mary and I both had distant relatives in Bethlehem, but no one whose doorstep we could turn up at with Mary about to give birth at any moment. So there I was, with my, oh, so dear little Mary, alone, and with no one to help with the baby.

But we managed because strangers helped us. First the kind family who let us use their barn, and their neighbours and other visitors who brought cloths and water, and later food and wine. They gave us what we needed at the time, and they didn't ask questions. I'll never forget that. After a while there were some rich visitors, who gave us things for the future- gold so that we could buy things, frankincense to offer to God and myrrh to for when one of us was ill. I'd never been a great one for God: a practical man like me just hadn't the time. But, slowly, I came to realize that he was providing for us: sending those people, and just when we needed them. I thanked him every day we were there, but I still worried.

I had a lot to worry about, especially when I got wind that little boys were being systematically killed. I felt alone then, too: alone, scared and somehow responsible for all the mess. I had the nagging feeling we had to go to Egypt for safety; I couldn't get the idea out of my mind! And it was crazy because, with our history, no Israelite in his right mind would want to go to Egypt.

But I acted on it, and off we went on another difficult journey, this time along the coast road. And we got there: weather beaten, foot-and saddle-sore, but all three of us alive and well. You see, it had been God again, telling me where to move the family and taking care of us while we moved. He carried on taking care of us in Egypt, too. It's not easy living in a strange country: you're foreigner, and people are wary, even suspicious. But again, we managed. We managed because God had provided that gold, and when it ran out, he sent people who put just enough work my way for us to survive.

Eventually, it was home again- first God gave me the feeling that we could go back to Galilee, and then more specifically to Nazareth, our old home. I managed to get the business back together, because I'd always had a good reputation, and life was probably as good as it could be. I had the little lad with me most days, first in the workshop and, as he got older, he'd help me in people's houses.

It was then I began to agree with Mary that he was really special. Not just special to us, but to other people. They responded to him in a way I'd never seen before: they opened up to him, as though there was absolutely no barrier. It was like that with just about everyone. I began to joke that perhaps he'd be a prophet or a rabbi rather than a carpenter. But I'm afraid I taught him more about carpentry than about God; carpentry's so much simpler, isn't it?

Has all the work and the worry been worthwhile? It would have been for any child. But this one- he's more than special. He seems almost to chat to God all the time. I know God has a very special purpose for him; I'm not sure what it is, but I know it's even more important than being a prophet. And my job? It's just about over.

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