

## Matthew 1:24 The Obedience of Faith

### Introduction

What shall I do? If you are an average man or woman there will have been a number of occasions this year [possibly an understatement!] when you have asked this question. It could be a time issue – your plans have to change your hand has been forced and you cannot carry on with what you intended to do. It can be a people issue, someone else's words or actions necessitate a change of plans. Maybe many of you have recalled in your mind just now one of those situations. In the first week of December 2006 Brandi Ervin, mother of a twelve-year-old boy, had one of these moments. Her son had found and opened his Christmas presents. Apparently he had entered his great-grandmother's home and taken the presents from their hiding place without her consent. What should she have done as mother of this child? Brandi called the police who arrested the boy for theft, handcuffing him and took him to a York County, South Carolina, police station, where he was charged with this offence. His mother was reported as saying: 'He has been going through life doing things... and getting away with it...it's not even about the Christmas present. I'd rather call (the police) myself than someone else call for him doing something worse.' The boy in question apparently had repeatedly taken the present, a Nintendo video games console, from its hiding place [BBC News website 6.12.06]. I applaud this mother for doing what she believed was the best thing for her son. Doing the right thing can be the hardest route to follow; the most challenging way to go. For the majority of Christians on the planet, outside the Western world, it can be a very dangerous life-threatening commitment to follow Jesus.

We need to ask this question: 'What shall **I do?**' because it is not the response of the person sitting next to you and me that counts –we live in a society where a minority of 30% and declining get involved in activities for the good of the wider society, at a cost to themselves. We are called to be *the salt of the earth*. *But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men* (Matthew 5:13). We don't have the right to criticise politicians if we don't vote; we don't have the right to complain about society if we are not willing to be part of the solution to its problems; likewise in the church of Jesus Christ early retirement is out of the question –or opting out of getting started in the first place –you and I have a ministry to exercise for God –it is simply the when and where not an 'if' that is in question. Our God is a God of surprises Joseph ben Jacob was a simple carpenter in rural northern Galilee, who expected only to leave his village for the annual trip to Jerusalem for worship in the Temple, usually at Passover. He was content with his lot in life, imagining a settled family life with Mary, who had been betrothed to him in marriage. [Betrothal more than engagement –it was the legal part of the marriage ceremony conducted one year before the wedding celebrations, a time in which either party could raise questions re the suitability of the arranged marriage.] But God had a different idea for this young believer –a teenager, just as He had other ideas for the older man Zechariah, who had thought he was past playing a significant role in the future of God's work. It is not our age that counts but our obedience to God to walk by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit –in the future He has prepared for us.

## 1. The Fact to Face (Matthew 1:18-19)

*18 This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. 19 Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.*

(a) **The Life-Changing News** “Joseph I’m having a baby” – nothing could be more natural in human society than the announcement that a baby is on the way. Yet it is not always as blissful a situation as it ought to be; I can recall the pain I sensed in the voice of a father of a girl in her late teens, some years ago, as he told me of how his daughter’s life had changed –one quick foolish encounter with a complete stranger on one occasion, probably under the influence of alcohol in a nightclub, and a child was on the way. Only once in her life, and yet she will live with the implications of those few minutes for life –while the unknown man may never know of the child he has played a part in bringing into the world. This man and his wife were not angry with her for what happened. They were, however, deeply saddened at the unfairness of life, at how some actions in our lives can overshadow the rest of our time here on earth, for better or for worse. The child in question was welcomed into that family home. ‘What shall I do? –the questions that come through our minds time and again when we feel so helpless and that things are out of our control; it is nothing new, most human situations like the one I have just mentioned occur in every generation –the only difference is the consensus opinions of the wider society. In the Sixteenth Century in Geneva Jean and Idolette Cauvin had to cope with the teenage pregnancy of his brother’s daughter who was living with them in their home after the loss of her own parents –what a scandal in morally upright Geneva! Human living is not a comfortable experience. We will have our joys and our blessings, but our sorrows and disappointments may be equally prominent; when our feet are metaphorically knocked from under us. In such situations we need to remember such promises as James 1:12 *Blessed is the man [or woman] who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him.* We can easily be tempted to give up our faith or our ministry for God when beset by trials and temptations. We must remember I Corinthians 10:13 *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*

(b) **The Character-Forming Choices** What shall I do? The Jewish law was clear, death by stoning for sex outside of marriage, but so few cases happened at that time and only in the rarest cases was the matter carried through to execution –for Joseph this was out of the question, but how as a believer could or should he handle the situation in a way that would bring glory to God. He had no easy answers, but wanted to honour the Lord. Maybe this week, maybe into next year, you and me as individuals, within our family circles or our church community may be faced with challenging facts. The issue at stake is not the problem, but how we handle what lies in front of us. Will we seek to show obedience to the walk of faith to which He has called us and go forward by faith or crumble in the face of adversity. I trust we will resolve as men and women of God to rise up and walk by faith and trust God for the outcome to the challenges we face.

## **2. The Conception to Consider** (Matthew 1:20-23)

*20 As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. 21 And she will have a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."*

(a) **Revelation from God** (vs20-21) The context – *as he considered this* (v20); there was no rash decision that would have been so easy to make. Days, possibly even weeks passed as Joseph thought and prayed, wrestling with what to do; God is not wanting to keep us today permanently in the dark not knowing what He would have us do! There are times when He calls us to trust Him, when there is precious little if any evidence of a response to our cries to heaven. These can be dark hours indeed, but Jesus understands as He endured the absence of fellowship with God on the cross in His cry *My God My God why have You forsaken Me?* (Mark 15:34) –yet He was never more obedient to the Father; in no context did Jesus exhibit faith in His Father's will more than on the cross for us. Yet in this context the focus is on encouragement to Joseph. Here was a person seeking to be true to His faith, desiring to act with a clear conscience yet from a heart full of compassion. Here was a man who was not into heaping condemnation on people who had done wrong like the tabloid press –but equally determined to maintain the highest standards of personal integrity. To such a person God through His angel revealed the answer Joseph needed to hear. We seek guidance from God. Now some of us, me included, are not always good listeners to what God might be saying or the person through whom He might be speaking. We can be so focussed on something else or some other way of addressing a situation that we could so easily fail to listen to the still small voice of God. We want the dramatic answers to prayer and supernatural demonstrations of the purposes of God. Yet His way is normally so different. In I Kings 19 Elijah was completely exhausted mentally, physically and emotionally after the extraordinary victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. He fled south to the desert of southern Judah and took time out and experienced a fairly serious depression for a time. God's people are human beings. Some times we have a faulty theology that allows for physical illness and medication to treat it, but rejects the reality of mental or emotional conditions that may also, on occasions, need medical input to correct. Here Elijah had turned in on himself forgetting that God was in control of the situation. The Lord, in I Kings 19:11-13 gave him an insight into His operations.<sup>11</sup> *The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. <sup>12</sup>After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. <sup>13</sup>When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"* God had a plan of action for His servant in the Promised Land, but Elijah could not see what God was doing, in contrast, he could only see possible obstacles in the way of its success. What is worse, insurmountable obstacles –in his view prevented God's plans from succeeding, not least was the fact that he was the only believer left! It wasn't true –God's plans were so much bigger than his; there were other people he had discounted who were wanting to serve the Lord and do His will. We too in our darker moments can have a similar tunnel vision when God has something better in store for us than we had imagined and greater resources of people and other means to accomplish His goals. A call to the obedience of faith –as Joseph here – is our calling as well.

In a previous ministry context I was talking to a teacher in a particular Primary School about a proposed Bible World Exhibition in that community. The teacher in question had made no profession of faith and had no church link, yet could not have been more helpful in assisting with this initiative. She came up with a plan of action for how we might get the maximum number of schools in the area involved, and at the same time make the best use of the sessions available to us. The conversation was entirely spontaneous and happened a few hours before a group of church leaders in that community had arranged to meet to discuss how our idea for this project might be realised. I had not the slightest doubt that day that God had spoken through that teacher and her proposal was readily adopted that evening. Was it just a coincidence – or was the timing of the conversation God-ordained? In our lives, in our church community are we sufficiently open to sense how God might be at work in our midst in answer to our prayers? I believe this year God has worked to answer our prayers in a number of matters through the timing in which opportunities had opened up for us in our relationships with other churches here in Broughty Ferry.

God may speak through another Christian, through a time of prayer, through His Holy Word as we meditate on it, or through some most unexpected apparent coincidence – but our lives are not subject to luck or chance, or whatever fate has in store for us ‘what is for you will not pass you by’, is a common expression I have heard often in various places in Scotland. Our lives are in God’s hands He calls us to trust Him like little children but also to have a sense of expectancy that is part of child-likeness. Sadly too often adults confuse child-like with childish; the latter is immaturity that we must leave behind; child-like trust in God is something we must retain, or as Paul put it in Philippians 1:6 *being confident that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Joseph was afraid when he looked at what lay ahead. Otherwise Gabriel would not have suggested he banish his fears and trust God to address all the outstanding issues that he could foresee as possible difficulties. The problem for Joseph was not one of understanding what was being proposed, but in the practical arrangements required to see it through to completion. God had opened up a way to accomplish His purposes on earth. The question was whether the human beings asked to carry out this work would trust Him to see it through and grant them the resources to carry it out. Like Mary and Joseph 2,000 years ago we feel vulnerable stepping outside our comfort zone. Yet the extraordinary thing was that God had asked two teenagers, who had never been away from home before on their own, to go to the other end of the country, and then go to the neighbouring country as asylum seekers for possibly four years! Put yourself in the place of Joseph and Mary’s parents, especially if you are a parent here. Compared to the challenges / opportunities we can foresee in our partnerships with local Christians in other congregations –how did this rate on your scale of risk? It was a huge step of faith and until this young couple returned to Nazareth with a child of nursery age, they would have heard nothing from them directly –even whether they were dead or alive through those years. Now, given that Zechariah and Elizabeth lived probably within twenty miles or so of Bethlehem it is not impossible that until Mary and Joseph had to flee to Egypt (see Matthew 2:13-14) that at least these relatives could see how the baby and his mother were getting on, and thus report back to their families in Galilee. Thank God Joseph didn’t know all that! God gave him enough information to act in obedience upon it. He does the same with us today. His will is revealed one step at a time. We often have to live with some questions unanswered-possibly for years- until we see how God will work things out.

What was it that would justify such a large step of faith by these teenagers? Matthew 1:21 tells us: *And she will have a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*” We know the ‘how’, through dying on the cross at Calvary. They were not told these details. What Mary and Joseph needed to know was that the baby in her womb would be the Saviour for which their nation had been praying and indeed for whom other people outside their faith had been longing, though they may have expressed their hopes using other terms. In terms of the future of this congregation it is in God’s hands. He will give us glimpses of the future and ask us to walk with Him by faith. He will allow us to see a brief insight into the future, but never the fuller picture. The question that comes back to us is this: Am I / are we willing to step out in faith and trust Him with our future and what He has in store for us both as individuals, in our families and in our church family?

(b) **Fulfilment of Prophecy** (vs22-23) *22 All of this occurred to fulfil the Lord’s message through his prophet: 23 “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’”* Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua meaning ‘God saves’ or ‘God is salvation’ –in other words our confidence is in the acts of God in history because all His actions are purposeful and appropriate and supremely are carried out that He might be glorified. When we stop and think –what is the purpose of my life? Why am I here? The answer is -to bring pleasure to God! That He might observe how I am living and be able to declare of you and me as He did of an Old Testament saint to Satan. *Have you considered My servant Job? There is no-one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil* (Job 1:8). Joseph was asked by God to accept that there was a purpose to His life and that the things that God allowed in His sovereignty to be a part of his life was part of His plan to bring salvation to the world. This prophecy given centuries before the birth of Christ – quite specifically a virgin birth –the Good News Bible footnote on this quotation from Isaiah 7:14 is horribly wrong. God inspired the prophet to use the specific word best suited for using in this context, not the general Hebrew word for a ‘young woman of marriageable age’! The name *Immanuel* means ‘God with us’ and was repeated time and again in that section of the book of Isaiah to reinforce the fact that God does not abandon His people. He is here and will be with you this week each step of the way; He is here with us as a Church through the decisions we make and the activities we plan –oh may we keep close to Him so that what we do may be a cause of joy to His heart. Hebrews 13:15 expresses it this way *Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise –the fruit of lips that confess His name.*

### **3. The Obedience to Offer** (Matthew 1:24-25)

*24 When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. 25 But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.*

(a) **A Time to Wake Up!** (Matthew 1:24) It was, though a time for decision – there is rightly time for research, exploration and study; time for quiet meditation and prayer, both individually and corporately, but there comes a time for action. By temperament some of us are keener on one than the others, but all have a place as we seek to discern God’s will and purposes. *When Joseph woke up* –in his case literal sleeping! Too often today the Church of Christ in Scotland is spiritually asleep with the devil delightfully rocking the cradle so that such people are not disturbed –in case they woke up and did things that undermined the kingdom of darkness! Do you need to wake up spiritually this morning? It may not be a question of committing your life to

Christ for salvation, though that may be the case? But as a believer saying Lord I've been drifting for too long I need to get back into action for you –show me how to get my life back on track as a spiritual warrior in prayer or in some form of ministry; or as Church is it time for action in going forward with what God has laid on our hearts this year? I believe it is!

(b) **A Time to Act** *He did as the angel of the Lord commanded* (Matthew 1:24). From numerous biblical examples and from much human experience in our own lives, we can be the most generous people in the world –that message was just right for someone else -what a pity they were not here this week! We may need to stop and to consider: Lord I am here what is it that You want to say to me today? Have you /I used the excuse we are too busy when God asks us to do something? And felt easily able to decline the call of the Holy Spirit? Some times it is a reassessment of priorities because we genuinely are in need of rescheduling of them; at other times better stewardship of time and gifts would allow us the opportunity to use our gifts in the way that is needed for His glory. Or is it simply a matter of obedience to that which God has already revealed His guidance to us? The issue for you or the issue for me individually will never be exactly the same as for another Christian? Too often we are like Peter when Jesus was challenging him about his commitment in future service in John 21 – the red herring Peter threw in *Lord what about him?*(John 21:21) Jesus brought Peter back to the point –what about you? Let's take a few moments of quiet prayer as we allow the Lord to minister to us, both individually and collectively as a congregation, by His Spirit for His name's sake. Amen.