

Matthew 1v18-25 Sermon: Impossible?

Intro

Welcome everyone, it's great to have you with us this morning, especially if you're joining us for the first time – a very warm welcome to you.

Christmas is a time for believing impossible things, isn't it? When we're little, we really believe that a man in a red suit flies around the earth in one night delivering present to every single child. But it's not just children! As adults, we believe that we'll get a white Christmas. Impossible. We believe that we'll be able to get our family together and nobody's going to argue. Impossible. We believe that football's coming home. Impossible.

We believe the impossible things, but deep down, we're not actually that confident. We don't really believe it. And maybe for you, the same is true of the most central impossible thing about Christmas. Jesus – born to a virgin. It's impossible, right? Just a story, just like Father Christmas.

Well the Christmas story, what we call the Nativity, is actually full of impossible things, and we're going to look at just a few of them today, and the first one is the big one.

Impossible thing number one

1) A Virgin gets pregnant (v18-20)

I find it quite funny actually that the word 'Virgin' has become such a common part of our vocabulary in telling the Christmas story to our kids, and singing it in songs. Try and explain what it means to a five-year-old without ending up with a ton of questions. I remember associating the word with Virgin Mobile, and wondering what that had to do with Mary. I also heard of a child who drew a nativity scene featuring your usual Mary, Joseph, Jesus, shepherds, wise men, and a fat man in the corner. When asked who this was the child said "Oh that's Round John Virgin".

But the word means just what we know it means. "Before they came together" Mary and Joseph hadn't slept with each other, they weren't actually married yet, just engaged, and pre-marital sex was against the Jewish laws. They hadn't slept together and she got pregnant.

Some people say that 2,000 years ago one woman lied about how she got pregnant, and then everything got a bit out of hand and grew into a major world religion. But the thing people miss there is that Joseph didn't believe her at first. It wasn't a case of a quick cover-up that fooled the fiancé, no, he was on his way to claim back the engagement ring.

Christmas is not a quaint picture postcard – it's a small-town scandal worthy of the Jeremy Kyle show. Joseph starts to notice the baby bump, and he asks what's going on, because he knows it's not his. And we assume she tells him that it's a baby given to her by the Holy Spirit and he thinks "What a load of nonsense, she's cheated on me. Right before the wedding day, she's gone and slept with somebody else. How could she!" I think that video really captures how he would have felt.

But he's really gentle with it actually – he wants to divorce her quietly. Now we might get a bit confused here, because today we use the word 'divorce' only after marriage, but the word here means to break off a relational agreement. And engagement was much more of a binding thing in Mary and Joseph's culture. So it would have been a big deal for this couple.

And according to the laws of the land, if a woman pledged to be married was found to have slept with another man, both she and the man were to be put to death. Whatever we may think of that, we've got to admit that Joseph is trying to do Mary a favour by not making a scene. He may well be saving Mary's life. But he is outraged.

Maybe you stand with him on this. Maybe you think this impossible thing is just that – impossible. Virgins don't get pregnant. Either Mary must have been lying, or this whole story's made up.

If that's where you start, then yeah, that's what you end up believing. But if you start by believing that God is at work, as he says he is in the rest of the story – then it's perfectly possible. God can do what he wants! And by that I don't mean some Greek mythology stuff, like Zeus getting a human woman pregnant, it's not like that, the baby's not half-man, half-God. He's a special, promised child, and Mary is carrying him before he's born.

If you believe that God's involved, suddenly it gets a bit less impossible. God is intervening in a special way in history, making himself known, making it clear that this is not a normal day. Something important is going on. And that's because this is not a normal child.

Which brings us to our next impossible thing. Impossible thing number 2:

2) A Saviour is born v20-23

So, Mary has a baby in her womb, put there by the Holy Spirit, and Joseph is on the brink of breaking off the engagement. And just as he's tucked up into bed, he has this dream. Now, we might think that seeing an angel in a dream would be quite nice, but angels in the Bible are actually very different to how we typically see them in Nativity scenes. They had wings everywhere, and they keep saying to people who see them "Do not be afraid" – so this would have been quite an ordeal for Joseph!

And the angel – by the way, the word angel just means messenger, the angel is a messenger from God, sent to Joseph – and the angel says "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." She's not been unfaithful! This really is a special pregnancy! And it's a special pregnancy why? Because it's a special baby! "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,¹ because he will save his people from their sins."

Notice that it's the baby that's special, not Mary. In fact we see very little of Mary in this story. That's not to say she's not important! She went through so much physically and emotionally so that Jesus could be born. But I think here in God's word, in the original accounts of Jesus' life, we find no reason to worship Mary, as some people do. She's important in the story yes, but it's Jesus who's the centre. He's the one we should worship and pray to, not Mary. She's just a person in the story, as is Joseph.

So what's so special about Jesus? Well there are two things, and they're spelled out for us in the two names that he's given in this passage: Jesus and Immanuel. If you were here last week you'll have heard Charlie and Beth speak about this then too. And the two things that are special about him are what he does, and who he is.

Firstly what he does: "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Do you see that? He saves! He saves from sins. Sin is everything we do wrong against God. There's a little way of describing sin, it's not from the Bible, but it's based on Bible truths. Sin is when we say S- Shove off God, I – I am in charge, N – No to your ways. When we try and run our life our own way without God's guidance, turning away from him. And it's something we can't save ourselves from. The Bible says that we are dead in our sins, slaves to our sin. Can a dead body raise itself to life? Can a slave free themselves? No! They need someone else to do it! The same is true of us with our sin. We're separated from God, living a life that displeases him, and we need a saviour!

That's who Jesus is. The saviour we all need. And the name "Immanuel" actually gives us a little hint of that. Matthew, the author of this historical account of Jesus' life, quotes a prophecy by a guy called Isaiah, about a child being born to a virgin, and this child being called 'Immanuel'. Now this isn't a Harry Potter type prophecy where nobody knows what it means for years and then suddenly it all clicks into place. No, this prophecy was a sign to one particular king that very soon his enemies would be defeated. The child is a sign of enemies being defeated. We don't need to go into the details of that Isaiah passage, but I think it's far too specific to just be about Jesus, there's a way that the prophecy is fulfilled before Jesus, when the King's enemies are defeated. But it's fulfilled again in Jesus, when he's born to a virgin.

And that actually can make us more excited about Jesus! You see, the Jewish people would have seen the name "Immanuel" and thought – "Hang on, that's the name for the child who would be a sign of the defeat of our enemies. God's defeated our enemies before, this child Jesus, also called Immanuel, means God's going to do it again!" Except this time, he's not defeating human enemies. He's defeating sin! Jesus is the saviour, the sign of victory.

Do you ever feel like you're stuck in an endless cycle? Do you feel like you keep messing up and doing things you don't want to do? Do you feel like you're not the person you would like to be? Self-help books will tell you you need to believe in yourself, have confidence, manifest change. The Bible says you need to be saved. You need a saviour!

Or maybe you think you're doing pretty well. Maybe you don't feel like you need to be saved. Well I don't want to tell you this, but I believe it's true – one day we'll all stand before God and give an account for the way we've lived our lives. And you might be thinking "God will look at my life and think I've done pretty ok" and I don't think he will. Because otherwise why send a saviour? The greatest gift you can receive this Christmas is to be saved. Don't leave it under the tree. We all need a saviour. A saviour who died on a cross to pay the price for our sins so we can be with God forever. But to be saved, we first need to admit we need saving. A sinking boat that doesn't send a distress signal won't have any

rescuers come near it. If we want to be saved from our sins, we need to come to Jesus and ask for his help.

But it gets even more wonderful, because Immanuel isn't just a sign of sin being defeated, it's a name that means "God with us". What does Jesus do? He saves! Who is Jesus – he is God! God with us, the eternal God of all creation in the shape of baby, with tiny macaroni-sized toes, and a big floppy head, and bones and snot and hair and teeth (eventually). God humbled himself, so he could be with us. This is not a God who stands far away, who doesn't care about our problems. This is a God who gets down and gets involved. A God who gives himself up to die on a cross to save his people from their sins.

We get a hint of that in the name Jesus too. It's quite subtle. Jesus means – the Lord saves. The Lord is another way of saying God. Why is he called that? Because he will save his people from their sins. Call him "God saves" because he will save. Who saves? God saves. Who saves? The child. Maybe, just maybe... They're one and the same. A little hint there. God with us, God saves. "Veiled in flesh, the godhead seen. Hail the incarnate deity". **God, covered in flesh**. The deity incarnate – made human. God with us. Not against us. Isn't that the best news ever? God with us. Will we be with him? His hand is outstretched – God is with us. Do we continue to go our own way, or do we turn back to him, and live with him as our Lord and King, and our Saviour.

So back to Joseph. He's heard this news, this wonderful news. What's he going to do?

And that brings us to our third and final impossible thing

3) A man listens to advice/Joseph believes

It's impossible! My wife will tell you that! No that's a bit unfair, let's call it impossible thing 3 – Joseph believes!

The third impossible thing is Joseph believing the first two impossible things!

Nobody else knows about this dream. That's the thing about dreams isn't it? Dreams were a bit more meaningful for people in those days, visions were quite common, so Joseph wouldn't have thought it was his mind playing tricks on him. But still, nobody else knows what he heard! He could wake up, forget all about it, think it's a load of nonsense, leave Mary, and get on with his life. Go and find a woman who's got a bit less divinely-conceived-baby baggage.

But he doesn't. He chooses to stay with Mary. "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife." He becomes the subject of a local scandal. The last few months of his engagement and first few months of his marriage aren't taken up with excitement and celebration preparations, but with caring for a pregnant fiancée/wife. And not to mention how he ends up being a Dad much sooner than expected! Some of us here may know how difficult an unexpected pregnancy is for a couple. And for Joseph there's always this little voice in his head saying "It's not really your baby." And then – I love this – there's a very human comment by the author, "But he did not

consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son.” That’s hard, for a young married couple! Maybe especially for Joseph as a young man.

He does it though! He makes the hard choice. And Matthew the author highlights at the end how Joseph gives him the name Jesus. He believes what the angel said about this child saving people, and months after his dream, he remembers and says “This child is going to be called God saves - Jesus – the saviour”. He believes!

Why? Why does Joseph believe? Well part of it is that he’s convinced by his vision and by the evidence, but if he wanted to explain it away he could have done, people are very good at explaining things away when they don’t want to believe. Maybe some of us here today have done that when we don’t want to believe what the Bible says about Jesus. No I think it’s more than that, I think Joseph sees that this is good news. Joseph goes through all the difficulties involved with taking Mary as his wife, because he knows this child is going to be a saviour – and he knows sure as anything that he needs saving. He hears the offer of a saviour, and throws away his hope of an easy life in exchange for a forgiven life.

What do you believe? Is Jesus just another story to you? Is it just too impossible for you to believe it’s true? Do you not want to believe, because it means admitting that you need saving? Well look at Joseph, the man who heard the news about Jesus, and decided it was worth going through all that he went through. It’s worth it for us too.

In the book of Acts we get a story of a man who becomes convinced that Jesus’ followers are telling the truth about him and he says “What must I do to be saved?” The answer is believe in Jesus. He’s the saviour. Admit that you need a saviour. Admit that you can’t face God’s judgment on your own. Admit that we need Jesus to face it for us, which is what he does. He took the punishment for every time we’ve turned away from God.

As we close now, if you already believe, can I challenge you today to see how much following Jesus is worth? Joseph took a big decision because he saw that Jesus was good news. Jesus saves us from our sins, we need to turn away from those sins and live a life that pleases him. We need to take those difficult decisions like Joseph, putting Jesus’ kingdom first, living his way. It’s worth everything – when life gets hard, don’t give up. Remember Joseph, remember Mary – remember how worth it it was for them.

And if you don’t believe, why not keep reading! This is just the beginning of the story, find out more. Come along to our Hope Explored course in January, or take this gospel home with you and read it over Christmas.

Or maybe you’re here today and you know that you need saving. You know that you can’t stand before God on your own merit, and you know that you need someone to save you. The verse I heard when I first became a Christian was “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” You don’t need to fix yourself up before you come to Jesus. He died for us when we were still sinners. Come to him as a sinner, admit your need, and believe in him. He can save. If that’s you this morning, you might want to use the words of this prayer as your words to God, coming back to him, and asking him to save you.

Lord God, I'm sorry for my sins, for how I've lived my life my own way without listening to you. Thank you that Jesus came to die for me so that I could be saved from my sins. I believe this, and I believe that it's good news. Please help me to live a life that matches this belief, to turn away from my sin, to obey you, and to follow Jesus. Amen.

If that's your prayer this morning, do come and chat to me or to Charlie afterwards, we'd love to meet you. But for now I'm going to invite the band back up and they're going to play us a song called "O come all you unfaithful" – everyone is welcome to come to Jesus, he is born to save us from our sins. Do listen in to this song and reflect on the words – and feel free to join in if you pick it up.