

MESSAGE – Unpacking the image of Immanuel

Read: [Isaiah 7:10-17](#) [Matthew 1:18-25](#)

Dark family secrets

I wonder if you have any **dark secrets** hidden away in your family closet?

In my family the best that I could find were that my maternal great grandfather was a German sailor who jumped ship in Adelaide and simply stayed on – without any sort of visa – and who later settled in the Barossa Valley. And my paternal grandmother was adopted into the family. The mystery of her origins were only recently resolved.

On Liz's side of the family, her mother – a Russian citizen – lived in Germany after WW2 under a false name and used a false passport to avoid likely repatriation to Siberia before getting on a boat for Australia. Liz's paternal grandfather used people smugglers to get the family out of Hungary after WW2. Under our current government's rules, most of these people would never have been allowed to settle permanently in Australia.

Jesus too had some dark secrets in his family history. The most enduring was the accusation that he was Mary's **illegitimate** son, born out of wedlock. In Matthew's rather brief version of the birth of Jesus, we hear this story from **Joseph's** perspective. When he finds out that Mary – his engaged but not yet married wife-to-be – is pregnant, Joseph imagines the worst – unfaithfulness and adultery – and plans to end the marriage as quickly and discreetly as possible.

He then receives some rather **unusual marriage counselling** – via a **dream** – and stays with Mary. Like his OT namesake, Joseph later has more dreams to warn him to flee from King Herod's murderous rage and to advise him when it's safe to return to Israel. In among all this mayhem and scandal, Jesus emerges as a rather special child who is given two rather special names. It also shows to the extent to which God will act to bring about a new beginning in a dark and threatening world.

Looking backwards to move forwards

Today's reading comes to us from the opening page of the New Testament. It suggests that if we are to understand anything about who Jesus is then we must first place him firmly in his Jewish context. Matthew's Gospel begins with a stylised genealogy that traces Jesus' human ancestry back through the kingly line of **David** and as far back as the father of Jewish faith, namely **Abraham**. Jesus is thus shown to have a legitimate claim to be the Messiah, the king of Israel, in the line of David.

But this genealogy also places Jesus within the realm of several **non-Jewish** women with somewhat dubious sexual history – Rahab the prostitute, Ruth the Moabite and Bathsheba the Hittite, probably raped and later married by King David. And so this child to be born – who will be the Messiah – has deep connection with what God has always done for and through the Jewish people – but also carries God's welcome of unlikely outsiders – people of dubious background – who prove to be people of great faith.

The names the child is to be given are equally significant. He is to be named **Jesus** – or **Yeshua** in Hebrew – **Yahweh saves** – and also **Im-manu-el** – another Hebrew name that literally means 'with us is God', or 'God is with us', an evocative and unique title.

Later in the Gospel, Matthew records the familiar promise of Jesus that 'where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name', he is there in the midst of them (Matt 18:20) – as **Immanuel**. And at the very end of Matthew's Gospel – the so-called Great Commission – has Jesus promising that he will be with his followers always, to the end of the age (Matt 28:20) – **Immanuel** again.

Matthew's story

Matthew's Christmas story is much darker than the one we normally hear which is taken from Luke's Gospel. Matthew has no songs or shepherds or choirs of angels, but rather deeds of darkness and mayhem. It's what I like to think of as the '**Adults Only**' version of the story. As we will hear on the Sundays after Christmas, Matthew's story has Joseph and Mary fleeing as refugees to Egypt and the murder of young children in the vicinity of Bethlehem to squash any hope of a rival king to Herod. It's a dangerous and violent story that helps prepare the reader for what will happen later to Jesus – in an equally dangerous and violent way.

But what Matthew's story does well is introduce us to the God who acts in **subversive** and **scandalous** ways ... adopting dubious women into the lineage of Jesus ... having the Messiah born in scandalous circumstances and then needing to escape at night from the clutches of an unstable and violent king. What an appropriate way to introduce a subversive Gospel message about a saviour whose company is often drawn from the very edges of polite society and who often acts in scandalous ways ...

So if today is Advent's 'love' Sunday, then we need to accept that God's love can be poured out in all sorts of unexpected ways on all sorts of unexpected people and that following the loving ways of this God will not usually be easy or straight forward.

Joseph's perspective

So how might Joseph have experienced his role in God's subversive story?

Let's imagine what it might have been like ... as previously these thoughts come from Rachel Mann ...

Do I look like a fool? I might not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but that doesn't mean I deserve to be treated as an idiot.

That's what it felt like she'd done. Mary. My intended bride.

She told me she was pregnant.

When she said it, I thought it was a joke. But from the look on her face – that fierce, determined, frightened look – I saw this was no joke.

I stared at her. I couldn't speak.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to run.

I kicked the chair across the room ... Mary calmly stood her ground.

Then I felt ashamed ... to lose my temper like that.

I took a deep breath and asked her 'who's the father?'

'God' she said. Just like that, in all seriousness.

I laughed out loud this time. Really? I don't deserve to be insulted like this!

I walked towards the door. I'd drop all the wedding plans. She deserved to be publicly shamed. Stoned even ...

Later in the evening I heard someone call my name, 'Joseph'. Just one word. 'Joseph'. It was the way they said it that mattered. It wasn't pleading. It wasn't full of tears. It wasn't fearful or angry. It was gentle ... and full of authority.

It was a voice that knew me. It was intimate ... like a whisper in my ear. It was a voice – impossible though it sounds – that knew me better than I know myself.

It was that voice that stopped me.

It was that voice that told me I should trust Mary.

It was that voice that helped me say 'yes' to her and 'yes' to God.

I want to close with a poem from Christian Aid ... I invite you to close your eyes and listen to the poem as a prayer ...

Immanuel, God with us;

in muscle and sinew,

breath and bone.

In vulnerability and risk,

escape and refuge.

In parable and healing,

encounter and sign.

In suffering and death,

word became flesh.

In resurrection, ascension,

and spirit come down.

In justice and grace,

patience and peace.

Immanuel, God with us,

Creator, Son and Spirit.

Amen.