

# THE RUN UP TO THE BIRTH

## MATTHEW 1: 18-25

Meeting Jesus in the Gospels

### OPENING PRAYER

Jesus, light of the world, we give you thanks that you came to be one of us, in solidarity with all whose very humanity is often called into question. As we celebrate your humanity, let us celebrate the humanity of all people. Amen.

### EXEGESIS

This section from the opening chapter of Matthew's Gospel marks the 'run in' to the climax that is Jesus' birth. It follows the opening 'Genealogy of Jesus The Messiah', which serves to establish Jesus' credentials as part of the line of King David. David was understood as God's anointed one within the Jewish or Hebrew Scriptures.

Having established Jesus' relationship with David, this passage continues to outline the events leading up to Jesus' birth. The story of Jesus' conception, from the engagement of Mary and Joseph through to his birth (v.25) is covered in only seven verses. This highly compressed version of the story (there are no equivalents in either Mark or John's Gospels) does not seek to offer an authoritative historical record of the events of Jesus' birth. Rather, the author's aim is to interpret the meaning of this event in the salvation history of Israel and ultimately, the whole world. The key text line for many people is verse 21 – 'She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' Jesus, the saviour of the world – God's special blessed one who is a blessing on the world – enters into our world in order to transform all that has gone before and all that will ever be! Jesus becomes God's supreme agent of hope for the world. The old rules are no more. A new day has dawned.

Jesus' presence in the world brings new hope for all oppressed and marginalised people. The old order is no more. There is something new in our world that means that all the people who thought they ruled the world are now challenged by a new power, a new reality of justice and peace. This passage is a key resource for Black theologians, for this new son, Jesus Christ is the sign of the new age to come when all forms of oppression and injustice will come to an end. This Jesus is the key sign that God sides with those who are oppressed and marginalised. God, who is revealed in Jesus the Christ, identifies with the suffering mass of Black people across the world and with all people who are the victims of neo-liberal policies of globalised capitalism. This Jesus gives birth to a 'new world order' that is the antithesis of that promoted by many world leaders.

### REFLECTION

Across the many centuries as people have reflected on this passage, some have taken the

'Virgin Birth' to mean some form of repulsion at or rejection of the legitimacy of sexual activity. Many Black religious scholars have argued that the nature of Jesus' conception and birth should not be taken as a rejection of human sexual activity. The concern of these scholars is to seek to rehabilitate Black sexuality from the demonisation of Black people as sexual deviants and lascivious, amoral beasts. Rather than seeing the virgin birth as a rejection of sex, it should be understood as a means of showing that there was divine involvement in the birth of Jesus, as God became human and entered into human history.

A Black liberation theology reading of this text challenges us to see Jesus' birth and life as a reflection of how God is in solidarity with all those who are on the margins. The very nature of his lowly birth speaks more to those on the margins, in difficult social circumstances, than to people born in palaces with ornate thrones (as Jesus has so often been depicted in art). Jesus is born in solidarity with broken humanity.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus is a blessing to the whole of humanity – in what ways are you a blessing to others? In what ways does your life stand for justice, peace and equity?
2. In what ways will Jesus' presence in the world (perhaps in your life) inspire you to break with the old rules and find a new way of being you?
3. In many Church traditions we light a candle to signify Jesus' presence in the world as the light of the world that banishes evil. What kind of things should we be praying for when we ask for the light of Christ to come among us?

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## CLOSING PRAYER

God in Christ, as we offer our praise to your Son, our Saviour, help us to see his presence in all the people we meet both this day and every day. May the stranger or the foreigner be identified with you as much as a stylised baby in a manger.

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (eds.) *Loving The Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)
- M. Shaun Copeland *Enfleshing Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2009)