

Liturgy of the Word with Children
Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A
18 December, 2016
Matthew 1:18-24

Catechist Background

'Betrothal' in the ancient world was not analogous to 'engagement' today. Marriages were conducted to strengthen family alliances and bonds. Not only were arranged marriages the norm; they were the only way to enter into a marital contract. Ordinarily, prospective mothers-in-law would act as a go-between between their respective husbands and broker the deal. Men and women at this time inhabited strictly segregated worlds; the bride and groom may have not known each other at all and may have had very little say in the matter anyhow. Once the bride-price had been agreed upon and had been paid, the contract was sealed. The woman then 'belonged' to her husband's family, even if the arrangements had not been yet made for her to move in with them and complete the marriage ceremony.

When Joseph discovers that his betrothed is 'with child,' he is perfectly entitled under the Torah to have her shamed as an adulteress and stoned. However, Joseph shows that his righteousness 'surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law' (Matthew 5:20) by planning to divorce her quietly. Perhaps he was hoping that the real father would step forward, do the decent thing and claim his child.

Before Joseph can act on his decision, the real Father does indeed step forward! In reassuring Joseph that his bride is honourable, the angel spares Joseph the indignity of being a cuckold. When the child's name is pronounced, further honour is poured upon the couple in the indication of the baby's divine mission. Jesus' name means 'God saves,' and through Jesus, God will save humanity.

Setting the Scene

For the activity outlined later, you will need pre-prepared cards (see description below) and writing/drawing materials.

We Say Sorry

Leader: You are our Saviour, Lord have mercy.

All: Lord, have mercy.

Leader: You are our Messiah, Christ have mercy.

All: Christ, have mercy.

Leader: You call us to you every day, Lord have mercy.

All: Lord, have mercy.

We Pray (1)

Dear God, Mary was open to your Holy Spirit and helped put into action your divine plan. Help us to be open to your Spirit too, and prepare our hearts for your coming. Amen.

Gospel Acclamation

Gospel Matthew 1:18-24

Reflecting on the Reading with Children

- Sometimes dreams are just silly dreams that have no meaning at all. Sometimes though, a dream can help someone make a decision or give them strength in a situation (You may wish to provide an example if you have one which is accessible to the children.) How did Joseph's dream help him?
- The angel told Joseph what the baby's name should be. What was it? Does anybody know what that name means?
- What did Jesus come to save people from? Is it important that we have someone who saves us?

Response

Give each child a small card/piece of paper with Jesus' name on it on one side and 'God saves' on the other. Children can then write their name on this side so it reads 'God saves Jack' (or similar). Children may then wish to decorate their cards. While this is happening, you may wish to chat with the children about the meaning of their names. You may wish to bring a book of names and their meanings, if you have access to one.

If you prefer to use it, a possible Hebrew spelling of Jesus' name is given below. Remember that the Hebrew language reads from right to left! The letter sounds are 'Y-SH-W-*' (י, the final letter, has no direct equivalent in the English language.)

ישוע

We Believe

Relating to the creed what you have shared with the children, ask this series of questions and invite the children to reply, 'I do.'

- Do you believe in God the Father, who created all that ever has been and all that ever will be?
- Do you believe in Jesus the Saviour who was born to Mary by the Holy Spirit?
- Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, who was with Mary and is still with us today to guide us?

We Pray (2)

Again, try to relate the bidding prayers to the reading by saying, 'Joseph tried to do what was the right thing. We open our hearts to listen to God as we pray...'

Leader: We pray for the Pope and bishops as we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth. Lord in your mercy,

All: Hear our prayer.

Leader: We pray for people who make laws in this country. Like Joseph, may they be guided by a desire to do what is right. Lord in your mercy,

All: Hear our prayer.

Leader: We pray for anyone who may be lonely at this time of year. Lord in your mercy,

All: Hear our prayer.

Leader: We pray for all families we know with new babies, or who are expecting new babies soon. Lord in your mercy,

All: Hear our prayer.

Leader: Lord, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, help us to remember the real meaning of your birth, as our Saviour. We make all our prayers through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen.

