

Liturgy of the Word with Children
Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A
21 December, 2025
Matthew 1:18-24

Catechist Background

'Betrothal' in the ancient world was not the same as 'engagement' today. Marriages were conducted to strengthen family alliances, and they were not normally planned by the two people directly involved. 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. This was because 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 both sets of parents were in agreement, the bride-price would be agreed and then paid, and at that point 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.

So, when Joseph discovered that his betrothed (Mary) was 'with child,' he was perfectly entitled under the Torah to have her shamed as an adulteress and stoned. However, Joseph showed 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 could act on his decision, the real Father did indeed step forward! In reassuring Joseph that his bride was honourable, the angel spared Joseph the indignity of being a cuckold. When the child's name was pronounced, further honour was 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 prepared cards or slips of paper (with 'Jesus' written on one side and 'God saves' on the other), plus 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)

Loving God, Mary was open to the Holy Spirit and helped put your plan into action. 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 and have no meaning, but sometimes a dream can help someone make a decision or give them courage (You could provide an example if you have a suitable one for the children.)
- In today's Gospel, we hear about a man who was planning to get married to a woman.
 - What were their names? (Joseph and Mary)

- In this reading, Joseph was feeling upset and not sure what to do? Why (he had found out that Mary was going to have a baby and he was not the baby's father).
- What was Joseph planning to do before he had the dream? (Divorce/break his engagement with Mary quietly, so that he didn't marry her).
- Joseph then had a dream in which someone told him what to do. Who told him? (an Angel)
- What did the Angel tell Joseph to do? (to marry Mary and look after her and her baby)
- The Angel then told Joseph what the name of Mary's baby should be. What was it? (Jesus)
- Does anybody know what that name means? (God saves)
- Jesus come to save people from something – what was that? (from their sins)
- Who is Jesus' father? (God)
- Because of Jesus, we are now connected with God again – is that a good thing? (YES!)

Response

Give each child a card/slip of paper with 'Jesus' written on one side and 'God saves' on the other.

- Invite the children to write their name (or 'me') on one side so that it reads 'God saves Jack' or 'God saves me'; *(you may need to help the younger children with this)*
- Encourage the children to decorate their cards;
- While this is happening, chat with the children about the meaning of their (first) names.
 - You could bring a book of names and their meanings, if you have access to one (or there are some websites you could use, e.g. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/first-name-meaning>)

We Believe

Relate the Creed to what you have shared with the children by asking these questions and inviting the children to reply, 'I do.'

- Do you believe in God the Father, who made everything and everyone?
- Do you believe in Jesus who was born to Mary by the Holy Spirit?
- Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, who guided Mary and Joseph and still guides us today?

We Pray (2)

Again, relate the Prayer of the Faithful to the Gospel reading by saying "Mary and Joseph said yes to God even when their lives were difficult. We now follow their example by praying to God for the things we need"

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 is lonely at this time of year. Lord in your mercy,

All: Hear our prayer.

Leader: We pray for families with new babies or with a baby on the way. Lord in your mercy,

All: Hear our prayer.

Leader: Lord, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, help us remember that you were born to bring us closer to God. We make our prayers through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen.