The Four Key People in the Background to Jesus’ Birth

We’ve just heard about four people who play crucial roles in the run up to Jesus’ birth.

The first one is Gabriel. Of course he’s an angel, and I’m not sure whether an angel really counts as a person. On the other hand, Gabriel is clearly our guy, isn’t he, because this is the San Gabriel Valley and those are the San Gabriel Mountains.

Is an angel a person? I’m not certain. He would look like a person. Angels like Gabriel don’t have wings. They look like human beings. That’s why the New Testament says that you can give hospitality to an angel without realizing it’s what you are doing. The other week Kathleen and I were lost at night in the industrial area in San Diego and suddenly a guy in a golf cart appeared alongside us and he could tell us exactly how to get to the 5 freeway. He looked like a human being, but in a golf cart in the dark in industrial San Diego? Kathleen’s convinced he was an angel.

Gabriel wasn’t in a golf cart but he wasn’t flying through the air either. He looked like a human being. We know that from the description of him in other parts of the Bible.

But he’s no ordinary person. Did you notice what he tells Mary to do? The first thing is “Rejoice.” And the second thing is “Don’t be afraid.” In other words, when an angel comes to see you, there’s good reason to be thrilled, but there’s also good reason to be scared. Because angels represent God. They’re members of God’s cabinet whose job is to come and put God’s decisions into effect on earth. And when that happens, it’s thrilling, but it’s also scary. If my boss comes and knocks on my door, I’m interested but I’m also a bit worried. When God sends his representative to come to see you, you’ll be thrilled but you’ll also be a bit scared. So Gabriel says, “Rejoice,” but he also says, “Don’t worry, don’t be scared.”

The second person in this story of course is Mary. How do you picture Mary? She’s presumably a young teenage girl. Girls got married young in those days. I was quite glad that we only had boys because boys are a lot less trouble than girls. If you’ve got girls, best get them married off as soon as possible. That will have been Mary’s parents’ thinking. Do you know what Mary’s parents’ names were? It’s not in Bible so it may just be somebody’s imagination later, but their names are supposed to have been Joachim and Anna, or in Spanish Juaquin and Ana. So when you drive up the 5 you pass between San Juaquin on one side and Santa Ana on the other, between Joachim and Anna, between Mary’s father and mother, and of course you’re on your way to the San Gabriel Mountains. Those Spanish guys knew the Christian story all right!

So Joachim and Anna have got Mary fixed up to marry a nice guy from the village. What does she think of that? Is she looking forward to it? Is she a bit scared about that, too? We don’t know. What we do know is that she is totally discombobulated by what Gabriel says to her.

Now in effect Mary is already married to Joseph. You know in our culture how living together and getting married don’t necessarily go together. During Mozella’s funeral on Wednesday her son-in-law told us about how Mozella discovered that her daughter had been staying with him before they got married. Mozella soon put a stop to that!

People may live together for quite a while before they get married. In the Bible cultures, it was the other way around. In effect, people got married before they lived together. So Mary is more or less legally married to Joseph, but they aren’t living together. And Gabriel says Mary’s going to have a baby. That would be confusing.

Oh, it’s okay, says Gabriel, don’t worry, it’s God whose going to make you pregnant.

Excuse me? Now Mary is even more confused. But Gabriel’s last words are, “Nothing is impossible for God.” They’re the last words he ever utters in the Bible. They’re not bad for last words, are they? Nothing is impossible for God.

Here’s Mary’s response: “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me as you said.”

Who is this girl? She’s just a teenager. But then sometimes kids see things so clearly, don’t they? I think I saw things pretty clearly when I was Mary’s age. I was thirteen when I decided to get confirmed—nobody in my family had ever been confirmed. I thought I knew what life was about. Of course really I had no clue.

Mary makes an extraordinary commitment. “I’m the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me as you have said.” She has no idea what it is going to mean. It’s going to risk her marriage, because Joseph will wonder whether he should divorce her. It’s going to risk her reputation in the village. She’s pregnant, but Joseph’s not the father. Oh, it all came from a meeting with an angel, she will tell people. Oh yeah, they will say.

And that’s only the beginning of her problems. This is a son she will never really understand.

And eventually she’ll have to watch him be executed. Again, at Mozella’s funeral Anthony was talking about a teenager he had met in jail who is about to go to prison for life for murder. Imagine what it’s like to be that boy’s mother. Imagine what it’s like to be the mother of one of those teenagers who have been killed by the police. Imagine what it is like to watch your son being lynched.

“I’m the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me as you said.” Mary is going need to mean it, even though she can’t know what it means.

Then there’s Joseph himself. In one sense the story doesn’t need Joseph at all. Yet there’s another sense in which Joseph is indispensable. Our Gospel told us one thing about Joseph, and it’s crucial. It’s that Joseph is a descendant of David. You see, Jesus can’t be the Messiah unless he belongs to David’s family. The reason why there had to be a Messiah was that God had made promises to David that he couldn’t get out of, promises about David having sons to sit on Israel’s throne. That promise has been in suspended animation for centuries. But one of the problems about being God is that you have to keep your promises. Jesus is God keeping his promise to David.

And Joseph is crucial to that. Because Mary isn’t a descendant of David. But Jesis is. And he’s Jesus’ father. He’s not Jesus’ father in a physical sense, but he takes Jesus into his family, he adopts him, if you like. And for people in Israel, if someone adopted you into his family, you really were a member of the family. We know ourselves when someone’s adopted, it’s important that they then really are the children of their adoptive mother and father. It’s not pretense. It’s real. It was the same for Joseph and Mary and Jesus. Joseph wasn’t Jesus’ biological father. But he was Jesus’ real father. It was Joseph who made it possible for Jesus to be the Messiah.

I’ve been in touch this week with a man who is now in his fifties and who is a famous writer, and he keeps talking about his own father, who I knew, and who was an oppressive presence in this man’s life when the man was a boy. The father died thirty years ago but he is still a dominant figure in his son’s life. The effect of a father on a son can be terrible but it can be life-giving. If Jesus was a brave, kindly, godly, committed person, how much does he owe to Joseph?

Joseph and Jesus were craftsmen. Traditionally they were carpenters, but it may be more likely that they were stonemasons. Just over the top of the hill from the little village of Nazareth, the Romans were building a huge new city, and it wouldn’t be surprising if they worked on that building project. I like to picture father and son walking to work and working and walking back home each evening, and talking, and I bet I know part of what they talked about. Because the Scriptures tell parents to talk about the teaching in the Scriptures when they’re home and when they’re out walking. Jesus had got well-acquainted with that teaching, because two or three chapters later in the Gospel he is quoting it by heart. How did Jesus know the Scriptures so well? My guess it that it’s because Mary taught him when he was little, and because Joseph taught him when he was a bit older.

Gabriel, Mary, Joseph. There’s someone else. Okay, says Mary, how am I going to have a baby without having sex? “The Holy Spirit will come on you,” Gabriel says.

Now I’m not sure whether we can really call the Holy Spirit *somebody*, either. At least, the Holy Spirit is a different kind of person from Gabriel and from Joseph or Mary.

The Holy Spirit being involved is crucial to Jesus being born. No Holy Spirit, no Jesus. The Holy Spirit plays the role Joseph would have played. Normally a baby comes into being because something from a woman and something from a man come together and – pow! – there’s an explosion. With Jesus, something from a woman and something from God come together to make the explosion.

When a regular baby is born, the baby shares characteristics from its mother and its father. You know, the mother’s good characteristics and the father’s bad ones. This baby is also going to share two sets of characteristics. He’s going to be a human being because of his mother. And he’s going to supernatural, like God, because of the Holy Spirit.

Christmas is cute, isn’t it? I was talking to someone the other night who was a bit sad that not only her children but her grandchildren are grown up, Christmas isn’t the same without babies and little children in the house.

But at another level Christmas is a mind-blowingly grown-up event. This isn’t about the birth of a cute little baby. It’s about the fact that God has come into our world in a whole new way.

A few months ago I had a letter from someone, and then a phone conversation with this person, and then a bit later I met him for dinner. In a sense I knew everything about him from the letter and the phone conversation and I didn’t learn anything knew from meeting him. But in another sense I got to know him in a whole new way when I met him. Reading and talking is one thing. Meeting in the flesh is another.

When Jesus came, it didn’t teach people anything new about God. They knew about God and they knew God already. But now they met God in the flesh. That’s what the Holy Spirit made possible. That’s what Christmas made possible.