

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

St. Paul says that, for us Christians, these things are of first importance: *“that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,”* and that Jesus proved His resurrection by His appearances to many at different times and places (1 Cor. 15:3-8). These things of first importance are hard things to hear. That’s why Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthians, saying, *“we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles”* (1 Cor. 1:23).

But actually before we can begin to consider that folly regarding the adult Christ, we have a bit of scandal and folly to deal with today regarding His genesis. Yes, that’s the word that Matthew uses in verse 18 of our text. It gets translated as “birth” in the ESV and the rest of the Great Bible tradition, and that’s okay, but that translation does skip over the scandal and folly a bit.

You see, it’s not just modern, Biblical snobs that struggle with what the Bible teaches. Ancients also struggled with it—with things like our victory in Jesus’ death, and like the origin of Jesus Christ. Of course, our Gospel text deals with the latter.

Now to speak of Jesus Christ’s origin is problematic for Christians, of course, for we confess that Jesus is “the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds,” as the Nicene Creed puts it. It’s problematic because John tells us that this “only Son of the Father” is the Word that became flesh, and He is the Word who WAS already in the beginning (John 1:14, 1-2). How could He, therefore, have an origin?

So must have thought an enterprising young monk called upon to copy this passage in Matthew. Or maybe he just misheard the word that he was supposed to copy. It doesn’t matter. He made a little change. Not much. He added another “n” and changed a “short” epsilon into a “long” eta, and, voila! The word becomes “birth.” And that little change got copied over and over into the Majority Byzantine text that was used for the King James Version of the Bible.

Now, it’s not a really big deal, for what Matthew means by the origin of Jesus is clear from the rest of his origin account. He’s not saying that the Son of God had an origin, but I’ll return to that in a moment.

The second evidence of the scandal and folly of Jesus’ origin is actually found a couple verses before our text. You might want to pick up a Bible and turn to Matthew chapter 1. The Gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy from Abraham to David to Jesus. And it follows a pattern. It begins *“Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah”* (Matt. 1:2), etc., etc. There

are several places where some additional information is given. It's Judah and his brothers. Some notable women are included. David is mentioned as king. The Babylonian Captivity is noted. Otherwise, it's the same pattern.

Now I would translate it, "*Abraham begat Isaac; Isaac begat Jacob; Jacob begat Judah,*" etc. But in verse 16, there is a change in the pattern. "*Jacob begat Joseph,*" but Joseph didn't do any begetting. Rather, he is "*the husband of Mary of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.*" In other words, Matthew is telling us that Joseph is not Jesus' father!

But this scandal and folly was too much for a couple other copyists. They couldn't take that foolishness, and so they made some pretty extensive changes. They wrote that "Joseph, who was betrothed to the virgin Mary, begat Jesus, the One called Christ." Joseph begat Jesus. That would mean that Jesus was not only birthed in a natural way, but was also conceived naturally. Happily, those changes didn't get copied much, for those are completely at odds with what follows in our Gospel text.

Indeed, scandal and folly notwithstanding, that this is contrary to all of our experience notwithstanding, that this is not according to our scientific knowledge notwithstanding, Matthew is clear about how God came to dwell with us. That's what Matthew means by the "origin of Jesus Christ"—not just his birth, but how did God get flesh? Answer: God did a miracle. God intervened into His creation. God conceived the baby in Mary's womb.

Joseph didn't believe it, at first. Scandalized by Mary's pregnancy, understandably, he was upset. He knew that they had not "*come together*" in their marriage, yet. The baby couldn't be his. The only logical conclusion — the scientific conclusion — was that Mary had been unfaithful.

Joseph knew what he had to do, and with Mary's obvious guilt, he would have been just and right to do it. Moses did permit a man to write a certificate of divorce to a wife in whom he "*found some indecency in her*" (Deut. 24:1). Jesus would later affirm that, citing "*sexual immorality*" as the only reason God would allow divorce (Matt. 19:9).

And yet, Joseph would have done the wrong thing, if he had divorced Mary, for Mary had not been unfaithful. And it took God's intervention again to convince Joseph to continue with Mary as his wife.

The Lord sent His angel to convey a message. The baby Mary is carrying is Immanuel, conceived by the Holy Spirit, Joseph was told. Mary has been highly favored to give her flesh to the Son of God Himself. Your lineage, Joseph, Son of David, will afford Him the title Christ and King, but faithful Mary, still a virgin, will fulfill what Isaiah prophesied of old: "*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and*

*bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.*” With the Lord’s intervention, Joseph believed. He *“did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son.”*

God was intervening in His creation, Joseph was told. He was sending a Savior, not to rescue Israel from Egypt or from the coming onslaught of the king of Assyria, but to *“save his people from their sins.”* Therefore, Joseph, you are to call Mary’s son, Jesus, *“the Lord saves.”* Joseph believed again, and did as he was commanded. He *“he called his name Jesus.”*

Dear saints, this account is hard for us to believe, isn’t it? It’s scandal and folly. It takes God’s intervention for us to believe it, too. According to our flesh, we’re not at all unlike Joseph, the ancients in the church, or anyone living. St. Paul reminds us, *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned”* (1 Cor. 2:14). And that’s exactly what God does for us, too ... He gives us discernment by His word, being taught *“by the Spirit”*; He give us discernment by Holy Baptism through which we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, *“that we might understand the things freely given us by God”* (1 Cor. 2:12), and believe them and be saved.

The Spirit gives us discernment to know and believe not only the message of Immanuel come in the flesh to dwell with sinners, but also the message of the cross, folly though it seems — that Jesus took His sinless flesh to the cross and grave, that He might save us from our sins, and He took His exalted flesh in resurrection victory out of the grave and into heaven, to open the way for us to be with Him in paradise forever. We don’t do it by our own reason or strength; the Holy Spirit does it in us: calls us, gathers us, enlightens us, sanctifies us, and keeps us with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

And even now, the Spirit gives us the discernment to know and believe that the same Jesus who came in the flesh and said, *“Lo, I will be with you always, even to the end of the age”* (Matt. 28:20), will come here today to dwell with us with His flesh and blood in the Holy Supper. We don’t need to change these scandalous and foolish words as people have in the past and still do today—but believe them: *“This is my body; this is my blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.”* Eat and drink these; be forgiven and strengthened in faith, hope, and love for life.

Come, oh, come, Emmanuel!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.