

Who are Mary & Joseph?

So why are we remembering a journey taken over 2000 years ago by an ordinary young woman and her fiancé?

Mary and Joseph's real-life counterparts lived in the Middle East around 0 BC (their baby, Jesus, was probably born around 4 BC). Mary was a young Jewish woman from a small village called Nazareth, engaged to be married to the carpenter Joseph when she was told by the angel Gabriel that she was going to become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. This was quite a shock, particularly as the angel told her that the baby boy was to be called Jesus because he would be the saviour of the world.

Joseph needed some persuading – by another angel – that Mary had not been unfaithful to him, but agreed to marry Mary and look after the baby as if he was his own. You can read these stories in the Bible in Luke 1:26-38 and Matthew 1:18-25.

At the time Israel was occupied by the Romans and when Mary's pregnancy was well advanced, she had to travel, with Joseph to the city of his ancestors, Bethlehem, so that they could be counted in a census. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was about 70 miles as the crow flies, but in order to avoid hilly and dangerous routes, they probably travelled between 80 and 90 miles during the course of a week or so.



The Bible does not tell us how they travelled – as a poor family they might not have been able to afford a donkey, but with many travellers on the same road, kind neighbours might have lent her a seat on an animal or in a cart to rest her weary legs. We also do not know exactly when they arrived in Bethlehem or how long it was before the baby was born. We do know that there was no room for them at the inn – translated to mean a lodging house or a guest room in a family home. Tradition has it, that they found shelter where the animals were kept, probably a cave like space under a house. It was in these difficult surroundings Mary gave birth to her baby. Again, we do not know whether she had help, we just know that when he was born they wrapped him in swaddling clothes and used the animal's food trough as a makeshift crib.

As you prepare for Christmas this year, spare a thought for Mary and Joseph on their journey. On Christmas Day, think of the new-born who, although he such a strange and humble beginning, would grow up to be the most talked about, written about and influential man who has ever lived, and who Christians believe was actually God!

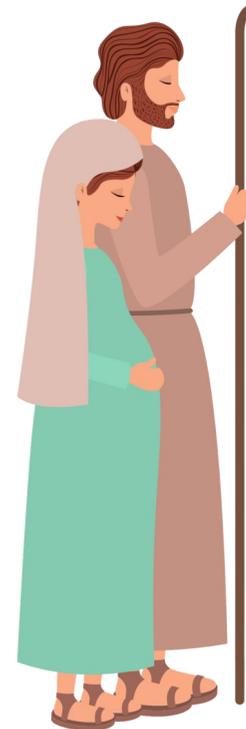
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