

# *that good man, Joseph*

a sermon preached on the  
*fourth sunday of advent*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by mother colleen clayton*

the lections: Isaiah 7: 10-16, Psalm 80; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1: 18-25.

In today's Gospel reading, we heard the story of the birth of Jesus. You may well, at this point, be echoing the words of Mary in another Gospel who asks, *How can this be?* since it is only the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December.

The reading should perhaps be prefaced with the words, *spoiler alert*. It is almost as though the compilers of the lectionary had a fit of pre-Christmas excitement and couldn't wait any longer to tell the story.

I'm sure you all know that the Gospels tell very different stories of Jesus and his origins.

- Neither John's nor Mark's Gospels include birth narratives. Mark begins with the story of the adult John the Baptist baptising the adult Jesus in the Jordan river, while John tells us of the cosmic Christ, the divine Word, one with the Father since before creation.
- Luke intertwines the story of Jesus' birth with the story of the birth of John the Baptist. He writes of Mary, visited by an angel, who accepts the extraordinary news of God's plans for her and proclaims the revolutionary Magnificat, while the birth of Jesus is announced by angels to shepherds in the fields.

Matthew actually has two stories about the birth of Jesus. The lectionary splits them into two. The first was set as the Eucharist reading last Tuesday. It is the one that begins, *An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham* (Matt 1:1). That story goes on to list the 42 generations from Abraham to Joseph. The second story is the one we heard this morning. It begins, *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way* (Matt 1:18).

Matthew's emphasis is definitely on Jesus, but if you listen to his stories you will quickly realise that it is not really the details of Jesus' birth that interests him. In fact, he buries that story in the story of Joseph's obedience;

*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her [Mary] as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (Matt 1:25)*

The story that interests Matthew is the story of Jesus' identity. The story of the genealogy gives us the human perspective; who begat whom, where the genes come from. The story of Joseph and his struggle to accept this unwelcome birth gives us the divine perspective. Not only did Jesus come *from* God, Jesus will manifest God's presence *with* the people he is coming to save from their sins. This opening reference to Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us, serves as a bookend to the resurrected Jesus' promise to be with the disciples until the end of the age in the last line of this Gospel (Matt 28:20).

Matthew wants his readers to realise that the story of Jesus is not just the story of another deliverer in a long line of deliverers. This is the definitive story of God acting in the world to bring to birth the Messiah, God's Son.

Today's epistle, a reading from the beginning of the book of Romans, also makes this story clear. Paul writes that he has been set apart as a messenger of the good news of God which has been promised through the prophets in the scriptures. This is the good news about God's son, *descended from David according to the flesh and declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead* (Rom 1:1-4).

For the writer of Matthew's Gospel, Joseph is the very ordinary character who holds the human and the divine story together.

This is an extraordinary role for someone about whom we know almost nothing. None of his speech is recorded for us, though we have some of his dreams. We simply know that he is descended from the house of David, that he is a righteous man, and a carpenter. After the story of the birth of Jesus he fades from sight and we hear no more about him.

But I find in Joseph a very real and human figure. I wonder, if like me, you know what it's like to have a Joseph moment? Life is going along smoothly, you know the plan for the future, it all seems good and sensible. You have prayed about decisions you have made and believe that God has set you on a particular path and then suddenly, something happens that throws the whole picture into chaos.

It reminds me of the 1976 song by Jerry Garcia, *Right place, wrong time*.

I was in the right place, but it must have been the wrong time.  
I was saying the right things, but I must have used the wrong line.  
I was on the right trip, but I must have used the wrong car.  
I was in the right place, but it must have been the wrong time.

The Gospel only sketches the distress that Joseph must have felt. It tells us that he tries to balance his righteousness with his integrity; unable to accept a child that he knows is not his but also wanting to protect Mary from the potentially deadly consequences of the public announcement of unfaithfulness on her part, he resolves to quietly end their betrothal.

Joseph finds himself confronted with a God who acts outside the bounds of propriety and morality to bring about this unexpected reality of God with us. Interestingly, the working out of God's justice has never had much to do with conventional morality. God's realm does not need humanity to be perfect before it can break through into our existence. God's realm has always allowed for and made use of human imperfection and frailty.

There are clues to God's subversive reality in the genealogy that Matthew gives us. Almost all the names in the 42 generations are, as you would expect, the names of men: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah. In first century Palestine, women were not recorded in official records. They simply didn't count. But when he records the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew includes five women; Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and Mary. They are an interesting group.

- After she was twice widowed, Tamar's father-in-law left her without provision or social protection until she tricked him into having sex with her and conceived a son
- Rahab was a prostitute who sheltered the spies who had come to find a way to attack and defeat Jericho
- Ruth was a foreigner,
- Bathsheba conceived her son by King David while she was still married to Uriah the Hittite, and lastly,
- Mary, betrothed to Joseph but unexpectedly pregnant.

If he had simply wanted to include women in the story, Matthew could have recorded names such as Sarah, Rachel, and Rebekah. The inclusion of these women, with their awkward and unexpected histories, is meant to show us that God's ways are not the same as human ways. That when human

hearts are open, disadvantage and disgrace are not obstacles to God working. This is a message it is always worth the church remembering!

When the book of Chronicles is written, the story of David and Bathsheba is removed. It simply doesn't fit with King David's PR, so alternative facts are provided. The extraordinary feature of Matthew's genealogy is that this story is reinstated. The story of the good news of God with us, is a story of remembering the forgotten, of the inclusion of the people you would expect to have wiped out of the narrative. Jesus comes to usher in God's realm of remembrance and relationship, in which the people who were previously overlooked are not just included but become central to the story.

Joseph's ability to combine righteousness and love is the way in which God's purpose will be accomplished. Joseph, confronted with shocking news, followed by a bizarre dream, recognises God at work. It seems that Joseph is a man who attends to his inner life and the movement of God's Spirit within him. He does not simply wake up, rub his eyes and dismiss the visions of the night. He knows God's ways well enough that he is able to accept that it is God's voice speaking to him in his dream, believe what God is saying and then act on God's message.

Joseph accepts, believes, does. His faithful behaviour when his life was turned upside down is a pattern for our faith. As we draw to the end of this Advent time of preparation, with the birth of Jesus the Messiah just around the corner, we are called to:

- Accept the truth about God in Jesus
- Believe in the salvation that Jesus offers us, and
- Enact this acceptance and belief in our lives.

As we follow this pattern we will know that salvation is found in God who is not far off or absent but God who is involved in remembering, including and transforming every part of humanity; God among us. We will believe in this salvation with its implications of inclusion and remembering. And finally, as evidence of our faith and acceptance, we will act to include others as we are included, to remember and tell the truth about the stories that others would rather erase, knowing that they are part of the story of God.

The Lord be with you.