

## Joseph – Guardian of the Christ-Child

Sunday 18 December, 2016

*Sermon preached by the Canon Pastor, Revd Dr Ruth Redpath, on Advent 4.*

**Readings - Isaiah 7:10 – 17; Psalm 80; Romans 1: 1-7; Matt 1: 18 – 25**

A long time ago, when Bruce - my husband-to-be – and I announced our engagement, I showed my ring to my nephew – then aged 4 and a bit – and asked him what it was. “An engagement ring”, he said. “Do you know what that means?” I asked him. He gave that a second or two’s serious thought and then – unforgettably - he said, “It means **you** have to go to the wedding”!

35 years or so have passed since that time, and many of the customs of our culture surrounding marriage and engagement have changed. But that small boy was right. I was not yet married. Until the wedding had taken place, there were no legally binding commitments, and Bruce and I could have withdrawn from the arrangement; I could have given back the ring.

In the times in which our Gospel reading is set, customs were quite different. Marriages were arranged for women at an early age - often as young as 12. For the next year or more they stayed in the family home, not moving to live with their husband until some time later. However this was a legally binding arrangement from the beginning and in that sense unlike what we understand by engagement today. It is this interval time, often spoken of as betrothal, between Mary’s formal marriage and going to live with Joseph to which this passage refers.

So, it was terribly shocking for Joseph to learn that Mary was pregnant. He knew that he was not the father. His only assumption could be that she was guilty of adultery. He had every right to divorce her and according to the Mosaic law she could be stoned, though it is unclear how rigorously such a censure was applied. Even if the full weight of the law did not fall on her, the shame of this happening would surround her for the rest of her life.

So what **would** Joseph do? What **should** Joseph do?

What sort of a person comes to mind when you think of him?

Our mental image is likely to be coloured in various ways - by the way he is portrayed in classical art (an older man, a protector rather than a lover), by the mundane roles we give him in the dramas presented at this season (leading the donkey, asking for accommodation at the inn), by the church’s relative silence about him in its liturgies and calendar (do you

know what day is celebrated as his holy day?). And the Bible does not tell us much about him either. We learn only indirectly that he was a carpenter, and we have no spoken words attributed to him; and no song of praise such as those sung by Mary and others involved in these events. And Matthew is the only one of the four gospel writers who tells us anything of the part which he plays.

However, emphasis is placed on one word used to describe him. He was - says Matthew - "righteous". For us that word has a connotation of smugness, perhaps associated with the unattractive notion of self-righteousness. But in the Scriptures it is the word that translates the idea of someone who genuinely and faithfully seeks to follow Torah - God's law.

A superficial view of the way the law of God was applied in the generations before Christ is frequently used to ascribe a censorious and violent culture of retribution and restriction to that time. But we only have to turn to the prophets and read of their appeals on behalf of God to appreciate that God's love and mercy was available to all who sought him with a true heart.

"What does the Lord require of you", said the prophet Micah, "but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Joseph's righteousness was of that kind. His thoughts were not of revenge towards Mary but of the disgrace which she would have to endure.

He thought that – according to the law – he had no choice but divorce, though he would do his best to minimise the hurt done to her.

**But in a dream**, a messenger from God came to him with a radical alternative – that he should take her to his own home – earlier than planned – knowing full well that the child she bore was not his – a challenge for any man.

**He learned more than that** – the child to be born was unique in the manner of his conception. Matthew (and the same is true of Luke's account) is determined to emphasise this was no normal birth. The child was not born of a human father at all. He is "from the Holy Spirit."

His conception was a singular, new act of God breaking into our human world, something for which there was no precedent. Certainly, none of the people named in Matthew's genealogy, many of them Jewish heroes, had a beginning like this. While the child would come to be called Son of David, as if in continuity with the old dynasty, that would not provide a complete description: his origin says Matthew is "from the Holy Spirit" and Jesus would demonstrate that uniquely in his subsequent life and activity, his death and resurrection.

**And then** Joseph is told of the child's unique destiny as saviour – not from the Roman Empire and their experience of occupation and oppression – as he, like so many others, might have anticipated – but from sin. Only God could forgive sins, so the appearance of

another who was to do this could have added a further element of surprise and disorientation for Joseph. But the child was to be named accordingly – Jesus – Saviour .

And then **Matthew himself** offers us comment on what he is reporting, because it reminds him of the passage from Isaiah we read earlier.

It is the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC when the whole region we now call the Middle East, including the Northern and Southern kingdoms of Israel, and Syria, was under the power of Assyria. The Northern Kingdom and Syria were together rebelling against the Assyrians and wanting the southern kingdom, Judah, to join them. Ahaz, its king in the direct line of the house of David, was alarmed, knowing that their ultimate plan was to replace him as king.

The prophet Isaiah urged him to put his confidence in God, that if he did so, what he dreaded would not occur. But “If you do not stand firm in faith”, Isaiah said, “you shall not stand at all”. He did **not** stand firm, he wavered. He wanted to go cap in hand to Assyria for rescue.

But God gave him another chance - we read about it this morning.

God was prepared to give him a sign to convince him that he was able to protect him from these threats. Such an offer seems strange to us. But in the scriptures many occasions are recorded where people who were facing daunting challenges, and doubting that they could carry them through, asked from God or were given something we might call hard evidence - proof, if you like - something unusual in the physical realm or circumstances which defied natural explanation but which showed that God was at work and could be trusted to keep his promises. Ahaz was offered such an opportunity - Says the Lord, “Ahaz, it doesn't matter how big or how little the thing is for which you ask. I will give it to you to demonstrate that your security is safe in my hands.”

And his response? “I **will not** ask”. He categorically refused God's offer of reassurance; preferring to act autonomously. In spite of this, the sign was still offered – a particular child would be born to a young woman – maybe a princess in the household of Ahaz – but the way this is expressed suggests that the child would be conceived and born in the natural way. By the time it was old enough to be distinguishing good food from bad, the threat from the Northern kingdom would have dissipated.

What an incongruous juxtaposition. A mere baby, a toddler, inserted into the story of warring powers? The clue lies in the child's name – Emmanuel – God with us. There is no limit to what can be achieved even in the most desperate circumstances when God is present and acknowledged.

Ahaz should have been waiting for the time when the child reached that age when he could expect to see God's deliverance. Instead, the sign, intended as a merciful lifeline to him, is

rejected, and becomes a sign of warning – the kingdom of Judah finally collapsing after the death of his son, Hezekiah, the last of the house of David.

This is a sad story and we could be pardoned for wondering how it is that it has found its way into the Christian tradition, especially at this season.

The sign – intended as a glorious promise of God's presence – found its contemporary application in failure and neglect. But in the multilayered nature of Jewish prophecy, there is often, as well, an ultimate and future fulfilment, and this sign was seen by Jewish people to resonate with the arrival of this unique child of which Joseph was learning.

Hence Matthew's comment. As the announcement to Joseph in his dream had identified the one to be born to Mary as the Messiah, they would see in this child the one to whom would be given the throne of his ancestor David. He would be Emmanuel – God with us – God would be among his people once more **and this time for ever**. No longer the sign, but the reality.

Waking from this extraordinary dream, what did Joseph do? Despite the ambiguous position in which it placed him, he did as instructed and took Mary to his own home and, as they waited together for the day of his birth, continued as if he had fathered the child she carried.

What a contrast with King Ahaz. Confronted with the symbol of a child whose life could validate the trust which he placed in God, he defiantly and arrogantly refused to acknowledge the source of his ultimate security and wait for its vindication.

Joseph, on the other hand, the ordinary man, the carpenter, but a person of integrity and mercy, placed his future, his reputation, in the hands of the one he had trusted all his life and in so doing enabled God's purposes in the child to be realised.

Understandably and rightly at this season, we speak much of Mary with words of profound admiration and respect for her culture-defying courage and joyful obedience in becoming the God-bearer, while Joseph stands in the background of our salvation story. Today we have opportunity to acknowledge his faithfulness and to ponder with gratitude and seek to learn from his example of love and grace and patient waiting.