

Joseph

24 December 2023

Readings: Isaiah 7.10-16 and Matthew 1.18-25

Preacher: Beth Keith

During advent each week we have sung our angels song and looked at the different messages sent which form the nativity story. On the first Sunday we looked at the message of the prophets foretelling the coming Messiah. Then John the Baptist, and the angelic visit to his father foretelling his birth. Last week we looked at Mary, the angelic message to her, and her response to God. This Sunday we are looking at another angelic encounter, in the angel's message to Joseph.

If we had been following the usual lectionary reading, we wouldn't have this focus on Joseph. And whilst he is there, present in our readings, and in our nativity services, and crib displays, Joseph can take a quiet, almost silent part in the Christmas story. So, what do we know about him?

Well, we have the gospel accounts. The account from the Gospels, were written later on, but within living memory. They collate the verbal accounts of what happened, but also shape the accounts to tell a theological narrative. This can help the reader to understand something about the events and what happened, but more importantly, they offer insight into the meanings behind the events, and what those early Christian communities came to understand and believe about Jesus. And so the ways in which the nativity story is framed by those authors, offers us theological perspectives.

We are told that Joseph was engaged to be married to Mary when she became pregnant. We are told he was a righteous man, or a just man. He was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, but also wanted to fulfil the requirements of the law of his faith, so he planned to dismiss her quietly. The text suggests that Joseph's character influenced his decisions and actions. He followed the Jewish laws, and this culture would have allowed him to disgrace her publicly. But this could have put her life, and the life of her child in danger. Joseph's character and beliefs shaped his response to uphold his own dignity and purity, whilst trying to limit the damage to her. He had resolved to act in this way, when he is visited by an angel, who persuades him to marry Mary and raise the child within his family.

In these short verses about Joseph, we learn that he is a man of character. That he tries to what is right and that he is thoughtful in his decision making. He is also a man who is open to hearing divine messages. And a man who is willing to change his mind, and follow God's call, even when it goes against societal values, and consequently where it may come at personal cost to him.

Later on in Matthew's Gospel, we read, that having been warned in a dream about Herod's plan to kill all Jewish babies, Joseph takes Mary and Jesus, and they flee to Egypt. Then after another dream, Joseph returns his family home to Nazareth, believing it is now safe to do so. This paints a picture of a protective father, caring for his family, making sure they are safe, putting their safety before his own.

In Luke's Gospel we read of Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to the Temple. Showing, he was raised within the Jewish faith, and later had a good grasp of the scriptures.

After that, we don't hear much more about the role Joseph played in Jesus' life. In fact, we don't hear really hear much at all about their family life or about Jesus' childhood. The Gospel pick up the story again when Jesus is baptised as an adult and begins ministry. And there are a few references to people questioning who this Jesus is, and how he can perform miracles and teach in this way, as he is after all, only Joseph's son.

So, we don't know much more.

But I wonder...I wonder what happened in that household. I wonder how he was involved in raising Jesus. I wonder how much Jesus knew, how much Joseph and Mary told him, what they told him. Later on, he appears to know that Joseph is not his biological father. I wonder what was said.

I wonder about the dynamics in the family, when younger siblings were born. And in all the talk of blessing for couples and families happening in the Church of England and in the Roman Catholic church at the moment, I can't help but see how clearly God blesses this irregular set up.

And as I have been pondering this text and thinking about Joseph this week. My mind has been jumping forward to story from John's gospel. Thirty years or so have passed and Jesus is now a man. He is asked for his opinion, by the Scribes and Pharisees, on a woman apparently caught in adultery, although the evidence is somewhat lacking. The text tells us this was something of a trap, a trap they were setting, a test to see if he would follow the requirements of the law. Will he too pick up a stone and kill her, as the law requires. It was a volatile and dangerous situation for the woman, her life hanging in the balance.

Jesus stoops down and writes in the sand, taking the heat out of the moment. And then tells those condemning her 'let anyone without sin cast the first stone'.

First silence, and then the crowd disperses, leaving the woman alone with Jesus. Free to go, and safe to continue her life.

And I wonder if in that moment Jesus had seen not just this woman in front of him, but also his own mother, her life in danger, and with it his own. How different things could have been if Joseph had chosen a different path. If Joseph had chosen to divorce her, or shame her publicly.

We don't know too much about Joseph. But from the little we know we can see that Joseph tried to be a good man, and to follow the expectations of his faith, but he was also able to change his mind and his actions. He chose the path of love, and he followed God, going against the expectations of those around him. And we can see what a difference that made to Mary, and to Jesus. Though we don't hear too much about Joseph, it's clear that you don't need to be one of the main characters, to play a crucial part, and affect how the story ends.