

Advent 4 (22.12.2019) The faithfulness of Joseph

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-end

Prayer: May I speak and may you listen in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Today is the day of the Winter Solstice, the darkest day of the year with the longest night. Many people find these winter days depressing, fearing the dark, hating the cold and wet and longing for the warmth and light of summer days. How understandable this is, especially if you live alone. The Welsh poet, Gillian Clarke, in her poem "Ode to Winter" portrays a different attitude. She suggests we "take winter by the throat" by experiencing the joy of feeding birds, of sharing talk and hospitality, of reading books and listening to music, of praising the wind and rain and learning to love the icy winter moon. It finishes in party mood:

"On the darkest day bring in the tree,
cool and pungent as forest. Turn up the music.
Pour us a glass. Dress the house in pagan finery."

How can we best deal with the dark and uncomfortable times in our lives, which we all experience? This morning we have lit the fourth candle of our Advent wreath. Traditionally, in the Church of England, this candle symbolises the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus.

However the main character in our Gospel Reading this morning is Joseph, the Father. Last year, in Luke's account of the Nativity, we heard the charm and detail of Mary's visit from the Angel Gabriel, followed by her song of praise and of a manger birth. This year Matthew's story of Mary's pregnancy is more straightforward, realistic, indeed almost blunt - "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah

took place in this way". The same story but from different perspectives, one from the mother's, the other from the father's. And the one thing that they have in common is an Angel appearing with the words, "Do not be afraid." Now prior to the angel's visitation in a dream, Joseph had every right to be afraid. He had been in a very dark, uncomfortable place in his life. The woman to whom he was betrothed had told him she was pregnant. Well, he knew it wasn't his, but how do you think he coped with Mary's next piece of news? She was with child from the Holy Spirit. These would have been very uncomfortable, dark conversations.

At the time of Mary and Joseph in the country of Palestine, marriage was not based on romantic love, but on a contract between families in which family status and economics played a role. The first step, the engagement, would occur when the girl reached puberty and when she would be contracted to her future husband. The second step, the betrothal, happened a year before the marriage and finally, the third step, the wedding itself, would last a week, during which time the marriage would be consummated and certainly not before. During the betrothal the couple were legally bound to the extent that if the man died before the wedding, the woman was considered to be a widow. It was at this time, the betrothal period, that Joseph heard the news of his future wife's pregnancy. To be with child before marriage dishonoured the families and was clear grounds for Joseph's dismissal of Mary. Indeed ancient law at that time even permitted execution by stoning. Mary's pregnancy was a difficult and painful gift. It scandalised Joseph and the neighbours and risked her being stoned to death. Dark times indeed!

We are now given the first piece of evidence of the remarkable character of Joseph. Matthew writes of Joseph, "being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, he planned to dismiss her quietly." Breaking off the relationship and not making a big deal out of it, seemed to Joseph the most honourable thing to do. A decision of a man of exceptional self-restraint, free from jealousy, refusing to act according to the law and considering others rather than himself. The Angel then appears to Joseph in a dream, confirming the child conceived in Mary is from the Holy Spirit and telling him to take her as his wife. Now dreams are elusive, bizarre and untidy in manner. How many people do you know who have made major life decisions based on a dream? Yet rather than giving in to his fears and anxieties of the situation, he chooses to be obedient to what the Angel asks, placing his trust in the hope and promise of God. He not only stands by his woman, he goes and lives with her, accompanies her on a difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and is there when the child is born, presumably acting as midwife, for there is no mention of other women present and names him Jesus as advised. Total acceptance! Complete faithfulness to God's wishes. Joseph played his part quietly with commitment and determination. The American author Madeleine L'Engle writing as Mary in a poem in honour of Joseph says:

"It was from Joseph first I learned of love
Like me he was dismayed
How easily he could have turned me from his house,
but, unafraid, he put me not away from him."

Faithful Joseph! A simple man of a honourable trade, carpenter, to whom we can all so easily relate. A common man who dared to be obedient to God's will for the rest of his life. He says nothing in the

nativity story, a non-speaking part. Appears just once more when Jesus, aged twelve, stays on in the Temple and then quietly disappears after his job is done, understanding that Mary was to play the bigger part.

What should startle us at this time, what should stun us is not that Mary was a Virgin - Christianity offers us a language of improbable couplings at this time, paradoxes that are meant to mystify, human and divine, word and flesh, Virgin and mother - not that Joseph refused to abandon Mary, but that God refuses to abandon us. I was greeted last Thursday morning after worship by a Christian brother from the YMCA with a hug and the word, "Emmanuel", heard this morning in our Isaiah reading and our Gospel Reading. "God is with us". "Look the young woman is with child and shall bear a Son, and shall name him Emmanuel." Like Joseph in those dark, uncomfortable times we must overcome our fears and anxieties putting our faith and trust and obedience in Christ, for he is with us.

In his poem "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" Gerard Manley Hopkins writes,

".....for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the feature of men's faces."

As we listen again to the wonderful story of our Saviour's birth, as we celebrate his coming once again, as we present our gifts to each other, let us hope we recognise him.

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