

Advent 4: 18 December Matthew 1:18-25

This sermon is largely from a story by Rachel Mann¹:

It is so easy for us to forget Joseph isn't it?

According to the Bible he is not even the biological father of Jesus. We are told that when he finds out that Mary is pregnant he thinks about breaking off with her – though, in his cultural context, that is not an entirely incomprehensible action. The nativity can seem to be all about Mary and the angels and the shepherds and most of all "the baby Jesus".

The whole scene sometimes seems cartoonish, a kitsch performance of sickly sentiment. Joseph – represented as an old man caught up in events he cannot begin to understand – is at the margins of a picture that has a smiling Jesus and adoring Mary at the centre.

In so many ways Joseph is an everyman and, indeed, an everywoman. He is the person who, like so many of us, is present in a situation but is not the centre of attention. He is the one on the edge. He is the one no one seems to take much notice of.

Where do we see ourselves in the world? We are all, I suggest, a mix of the truly remarkable and the very ordinary. Perhaps some of us occupy or have occupied very powerful and influential positions in life or will do one-day. But even so, how difficult it can seem to make a difference, to bring about change. We are all very aware, I trust, of the places where there is no peace tonight, where people across the world have very little or live in fear. Even the most powerful often feel impotent in the face of so much need - left on the sidelines, looking on. Indeed I have spoken to politicians who have admitted that on approaching the summit of power they have been shocked to discover the extent to which their hands are tied. How much more so for us, then.

Like Joseph, do we need a second chance at life? The older I get, the more I realise i need not just a second or third or even a fourth

¹ A Star-filled Grace, Worship and prayer resources for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany, Rachel Mann, p 181

chance but countless chances. Because, frankly, living life and indeed trying to live it well involves making countless mistakes. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. And all we can hope for is that our judgement and luck are such that the errors we make are not too disastrous or damaging. Sometimes it's very hard not to look back on choices and decisions with regret, to imagine life was easier or simpler in the past.

Ultimately, Jesus Christ – the God who risks everything to be with us as one of us – is all about **second chances**. For imagine living in a world where everyone had to be perfect, could not take risks, could not make mistakes; where we were condemned as soon as we made a wrong step. How long would even the best of us last? We are all compromised. We are all people of unclean hands and unclean lips. Without grace and forgiveness and love we would be totally lost.

Jesus is grace and forgiveness and love – and therefore hope. He is the one who exposes a ruthless world for what it is and shows us another way. He calls us out of ourselves to demonstrate love for the weakest and most vulnerable – for the ones who are like babies in our arms. Joseph – the forgotten man – is an icon of grace. He offers a template for masculine performance that is not predicated on anxiety. For the choice presented to the Joseph of our nativity stories is pretty stark. He can choose a patriarchally sanctioned rejection of Mary on the grounds that – by her own admission – she is pregnant by someone else. She has entered a contract of commitment with him but has reneged on that commitment.

In order to maintain his status and power, the patriarchal system would support Joseph's rejection of her, apportioning blame on Mary's side and leaving him unsullied.

However, if Joseph chooses to remain faithful to Mary he leaves himself open to suggestions that he has behaved inappropriately. The implication would be that the child is his and he has had conjugal relations ahead of a formal sanction of his union. If that brings his status into question, how much more so for his intended? Mary can be scapegoated as a person who "gives it out" before the

relationship has been legalised. Together they might be quietly treated as different, as marginal. They would have to negotiate the gossip and innuendo of small town and village life.

But there are other things at stake too. Psychologically, when Joseph makes his commitment to Mary, he's committing to a child he knows is not his. In a patriarchally shaped culture, he is stepping outside the pride and security of paternity. Sons are prized over daughters, but what is truly prized is a boy who can demonstrate he is genuinely his father's son. Indeed, one dimension of the genealogy contained in Matthews Gospel is to ensure that Jesus' forebears are properly asserted. (an exciting aspect of that genealogy is how it departs from the male line and includes women like Ruth.)

So Joseph's commitment to a child that is not directly his own, and to a woman who he might legitimately have abandoned, is an extraordinary and exacting subversion of the patriarchy implicit in the situation.

Joseph's trust and commitment, ultimately to God, is a rejection of a conception of masculinity that is so unsure of itself that it has to define its borders carefully. Joseph's identity is not dependent on being assured of his paternity of Jesus. He commits to a son who is not biologically his. Nor does it depend on having a wife whose status is above question or innuendo. He takes the power and position given to him in virtue of his status as a man and places it into radical question and into dangerous space. In short, he takes the risk of letting his masculinity be interrogated and remade by a radical God.²

This week I have spent some special times with people listening to stories of pain, and choosing life. I have also been spending time with Joseph, Jesus' adopted father, and listening to him. For me, this is a different way to prepare for Christmas. There is trouble, and difficult questions, but there is also space and strength and vulnerability, and seeking to serve God, to know God, to know

² ibid

God's calling in my life right now. Joseph, and those I have spent time with this week have so much to teach me this Advent. Now, I think I am ready to embrace Christmas..

The birth narratives are not really about the baby Jesus; they are about the Jesus whom we see in ministry and crucified under the banner 'King of the Jews'.³

Reflect on Joseph this week, and see what he teaches you of Christmas. Then, look beyond him to the child, born, and growing into adulthood, under Joseph's guidance, God-with-us.

Susanna

³ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtAdvent4.htm>