

Advent 4 – Matthew 1.18-25

Today then is the fourth, and last Sunday in Advent.

As we've worked our way around our advent wreath, we've pondered how

Week 1: God promised the Patriarchs (the founder fathers of the people of God) that he would send his Son.

Week 2: God told the prophets to tell the people about the coming of Jesus.

Week 3: God raised up John the Baptist to prepare the way for the Messiah,
And now, week 4, we celebrate God's preparing of Mary to bear his Son.

And hence our Gospel reading this morning of Matthew 1.18-25.

But whilst this passage outlines the birth of Jesus, it is written from the perspective of Joseph, rather than Mary.

Of course, only two of the Gospels begin with accounts of Jesus' birth.

Mark's much more snappy Gospel begins with Jesus' public ministry. John begins, typically, with a theological reflection.

Luke's quite detailed account of Jesus' birth seems to rely much more on Mary's reminiscences.

But here, in Matthew's Gospel, it would seem that Matthew has access to the reminiscences of Joseph; and interesting they are too!

So, let's look at this passage of Matthew 1.18-25 a little more closely.

It follows, obviously, Matthew 1.1-17, where Matthew has set out the genealogy of Jesus.

Jesus' line is important to Matthew, and his presumably largely Jewish Christian readers, for several reasons:

Jesus line can be traced back, through the kings of Israel to Israel's great king, David – thus Jesus' kingly credentials are established.

And Jesus stands at the start of the seventh group of seven people in a direct line from Abraham the founding father of the people – a clear indication that Jesus was rather special.

Matthew 1 .18:

Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married. Engagement in Jewish society at this time was much stronger than an engagement today. It meant that even though the woman would still be living in her father's house, the couple were inextricably bound together. Only divorce could prevent marriage. The death of one partner would leave the other a widow.

And it is in this context that Mary is found to be pregnant.

And we can imagine the shock that this must have been to Joseph.

He must have thought he knew Mary well. Not only were they engaged, but they had probably grown up together.

He knew her, he trusted her, he loved her; and he thought she loved him.

He must have been devastated.

Back in days past, Mary would have been stoned.

But now, Jewish society practiced divorce instead.

And verse 19, this is exactly what Joseph planned.

And Matthew gives us no hint that Joseph is in the wrong in doing this – indeed, it is what the Law required and Joseph was a righteous man.

But his aim was to apply the Law in a loving way – not exposing Mary to public disgrace, but dismissing her quietly.

There I suspect is a lesson for us all; and for the church in general.

How often do we swing between legalistic righteous indignation and a sappy sentimental, all you need is love, sentimental attitude?

Wouldn't we be better off if we said, "we will stick to what God has shown us to be true, even when it is hard or uncomfortable, but we will apply God's truth with love and with grace"?

So, it all looks rather bleak for Mary; she is an unmarried mother-to-be with a very shaky future.

But this, of course is where God intervenes once again, as verse 20, God sends an angel to Joseph in a dream.

And again, credit to Joseph, he is in tune with God enough, and not so prone to scepticism that he writes it off as too much strong cheese, that he recognises the voice of God.

I do fear that as Christians in a very scientific age, where we want everything rational and explained, that we may miss the voice of God.

It is just possible that God may want to speak to us in dreams. And highly likely that he will want to communicate in some way, be it visions, prophecies, words of knowledge and wisdom, or even a quiet inner voice.

Let's not be so busy, or so sceptical, that we miss the voice of God.

Indeed, let's covet it, and seek it, with all our hearts.

You know, I take great comfort from this verse, verse 20, of Matthew 1.

Joseph is confronted with the most difficult situation, he has a tough decision to make, he considers what God has revealed and he acts upon it.

Normally, he would have been doing exactly the right thing.

It just so happens that in this particular circumstance he's got it wrong.

What does God do?

Certainly not say, "Oh bother, Joseph's made a pig's ear of that. That's blown it!"

Certainly not, "What a whally. Now he's missed my plan for his life I'll move on to someone who will do what I want!"

No, God helps Joseph change his mind and come to the right conclusions and do the right thing.

We all face difficult decisions at times.

All we can do is, like Joseph, consider the circumstances, consider what God has revealed to us to date, pray, and then jump.

But I genuinely believe that if we make these decisions seeking to do what God wants, with his glory in mind, God is perfectly able to steer us right again if we have made a mistake.

We need to be serious, righteous and prayerful in the decisions we make, but not fearful, for God is perfectly capable of guiding his people in the direction they should go.

So, God gives Joseph some quite detailed instructions about what he is to do:

Verse 20: he is to marry Mary as planned; the baby isn't a result of unfaithfulness but the work of the Holy Spirit.

And verse 21: Joseph is to name the baby "Jesus", meaning "God saves".

And so, verse 24 and 25, Joseph does.

The perfect model of obedience to God.

Not uninterestingly refraining from sex with Mary until after Jesus is born.

Yes, after Jesus was born Mary and Joseph enjoyed a normal marriage, with all that entails, and we must assume, the 'brothers' of Jesus we meet later in the Gospels are the fruit of these normal marital relations.

Well, so far, we've pondered on a number of things we might learn from Joseph.

But I wanted to end by pointing to some of the important things this passage tells us about Jesus.

Of course, the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth points us towards the fact that Jesus was to be no ordinary baby – or man!

But did you spot in this passage the three names, or titles, given to Jesus?
Messiah – meaning anointed/sent One,
Jesus – meaning God saves,
And Emmanuel – meaning God with us.

Jesus – the One sent by God, to be God's presence with us and to save us.

The birth we are preparing to celebrate was not just unusual, or special, or even miraculous.

It was a birth, the birth, that was to turn the world upside down.

God was sending his son so that we might see and hear God in the flesh, and so that he might save us from the mess we have made of ourselves, our communities and the world.

This birth is not just a birth to be celebrated,
But the One who was born is to be accepted, believed in, followed and loved.