

Advent 4 - In Praise of Joseph

Matthew 1:18-25

Scripture provides us with a rare opportunity today – for today a window has been opened for us to consider the role of Joseph in the Christmas narrative. And it's good, I think, to reflect on this man who is often perceived as the silent partner in this unusual story, in which so very much of the focus, traditionally, is on Mary, his betrothed, and on the child she's expecting. It often feels to me that Joseph gets short shrift: he's pretty much been reduced to being just a figure in a Nativity scene – the amenable guy who escorts Mary safely to Bethlehem, granted - but beyond that he just seems to be a passive onlooker, a shadowy figure lurking in the background, and pretty incidental to the main event.

But we remind ourselves today that Joseph was a real person, Mary's partner in life, and Jesus' parent.... a man who made a commitment to her, to her baby, and to God. As the story has it, he flew in the face of religious custom in order to do as God directed, no matter what it may have cost down the road. He did the moral thing, the right thing, and apparently never once asked, "*What's in it for me?*"

Well, according to the story, there **wasn't** much in it for him, at least not at the outset when the tough decisions had to be made. But still, he did the right thing, keeping Mary and the baby under his protection, support and care, because without it, we can safely conclude that they wouldn't have survived. But beyond those theoretical and practical considerations, we have to assume that he provided more than just a roof over their heads and bread in the pantry. We can safely imagine that he helped raise the infant Jesus to adulthood; probably taught him a trade; imparted traditional Jewish values and beliefs; guided him and corrected his behaviour; encouraged the study of the holy books as they existed at that time; instilled the hope and vision of the prophets, and taught him the time-honoured psalms traditionally ascribed to King David.

After the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, we hear about Joseph only once more - and that's the episode recorded in Luke's gospel when Jesus is twelve and they take him up to Jerusalem for Passover; and they think they've lost him, only he turns up in the Temple with the scholars having a grand old debate. But that's it for Joseph – and as a result the presumption has been made over time, perhaps mistakenly, that he was significantly older than Mary, and that he died before Jesus began his public ministry, because he isn't mentioned again; **but**, his work has been done by that time, and done well.

In Scripture, Joseph is never described as **saying** anything – he's a voiceless character whose actions speak **for** him, I suppose. It is well said that actions speak louder than words....but I still think that it's fun to wonder what he would say to us if he had the chance. And I think first off he'd want us to minimize our preoccupation with the peculiar reproductive mechanics that are suggested by the nativity story, and to look instead for its deeper spiritual significance – and I think we can safely assume that the whole point of the

story is to assert, with some authority, that no matter how irregular his arrival into the world might have been viewed, nevertheless in the person of Jesus, God was declaring a new era of grace. In an unmistakable foreshadowing of the kind of ethics that Jesus himself would eventually be exercising in the world, Joseph confronts the crippling consequences of Mary's potential *dis*grace, and chooses grace instead. He replaces judgement with compassion....and someday Jesus will do the same thing for countless others....so the apple will not fall far from the tree, as the old saying goes. Joseph sets a standard of compassion that Jesus will go on to not only match, but also exceed.

Second, I think that Joseph would have something to say about the nature of family – perhaps that the essence of family is more appropriately rooted in love and compassion for each other than by any accident of birth, gender, genetics, or legal status. Commitment, love and care are what create a family, and really, all else is secondary.

And third, I think he would probably challenge our present day tendency to ask “*What's in it for me?*” as a precursor to any important decision making. If our own self- interest is what drives our decisions, then we risk missing out on some of the blessings that **only** come when we give up our own agenda, and open ourselves to the glorious and sometimes whimsical surprises that come from God.

Because scripture is largely silent on Jesus' early years, we tend to forget that Jesus had human parents who probably had a **great deal** to do with the kind of person that he turned out to be.... and today we give thanks for Joseph and his example of selfless, compassionate care for Mary and eventually Jesus, and for his willingness to both trust *and participate* in God's purposes.

Barbara Brown Taylor summarizes it this way, “*The heart of this story is about a just man who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked: his wife pregnant, his trust betrayed, his name ruined, his future revoked. It is about a righteous man who surveys a mess he has had absolutely nothing to do with and decides to believe that God is present in it.*”

That it may it be so for you and for me we pray, and together say, Amen.