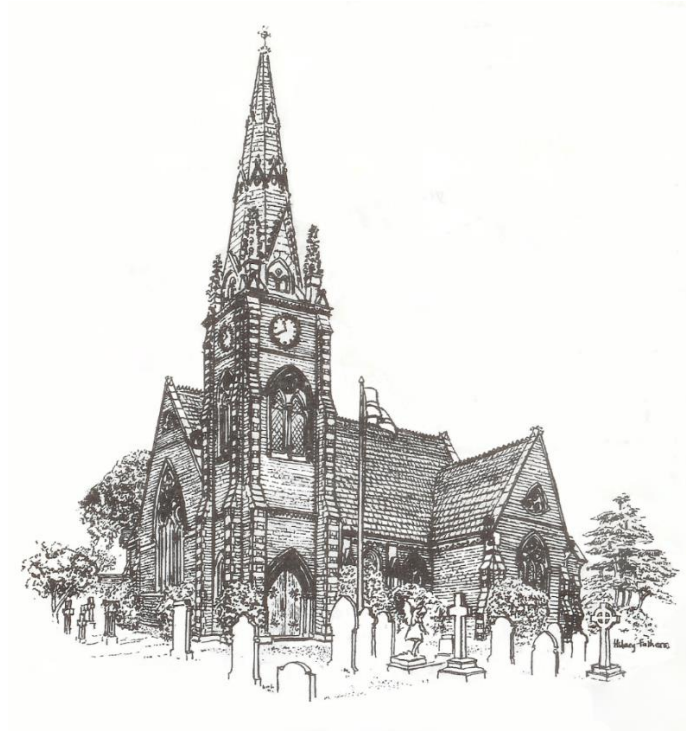


# All Saints' Thornton Hough



**Lent 2021: On the Bible's back roads  
Where old stories and our stories meet.**

**Week 4**

Tuesday March 9<sup>th</sup>: Joseph: [Matthew 1:18-25](#):

**‘Joseph her husband was a righteous man’**

In the course of parish ministry, I attended many nativity plays in schools and churches. Understandably they don't tend to focus on the apparently scandalous event at the heart of the story – that Mary is pregnant and Joseph is not the father. It would be fair to say that while Luke's account of the birth of Jesus portrays Mary's perspective, Matthew gives us more than a hint of what might have been going through Joseph's mind as he experiences the roller coaster ride of Mary's pregnancy.



*Reconstruction of carpenter's workshop,  
Nazareth village*

When Joseph discovered that Mary was expecting a child, Matthew tell us that he ‘considered this’ (v 19). We might well ask what this actually involved. The Greek word used, ‘enthymeomai’, suggests that he did this with not a little emotional force. To start with, the penalty for what he understood Mary's actions to be in being unfaithful to him as her betrothed was death by stoning (Deut 22 v 23-24) – according to the Law of Moses, her life was forfeit. Added to this, of course, was his personal sense of betrayal; how could Mary have done this? We can imagine the anger, the confusion and disappointment circling around in his mind endlessly coalescing into the same thought; ‘I just don't understand!’ Joseph was not some kind of super hero able to rise above such thoughts; he was a flesh and blood human being whose life at this precise moment was falling apart at the seams because of a scandal he would never live down. It is to his enormous credit that his intuitive thought is not about how he might take revenge according to the letter of the law but how he can save Mary's life and reputation (v 19).

This begs the question as to why the angel came to see Mary alone rather than with Joseph. Why was he excluded from the decision-making process? There isn't a definitive answer to this question yet I would tentatively suggest that in a stiflingly patriarchal society in which all important decisions were taken by men, there is a divine marker being put down in that this most significant of choices was Mary's to make. If we consider another Mary standing outside the tomb of Jesus

and being the first to meet the risen Lord we can see that the life of Jesus is bookended with stories about the emancipation of women. For the church this profoundly challenges the exclusion of women from ordained ministry that is only now being meaningfully addressed and is still not a reality in every church tradition two thousand years later.

Joseph really comes into his own after he has his own angelic encounter in the course of a dream in which the situation is explained to him (v 20-23). He will have realised firstly that Mary, against all the odds, has not betrayed him but also that absolutely nobody else is going to believe that. 'Do not be afraid', says the angel to Joseph. There will be misunderstanding, ribaldry even (I wonder if and how long 'Joseph and Mary' jokes did the rounds in Nazareth) and a very uncertain future but Joseph is prepared to do the right thing rather than the expected thing. We can imagine comments along the lines of, 'Joseph, what are you doing, you're out of your mind!' coming his way. But he knows the will of God and responds obediently. It's why he and Mary end up on the road to Bethlehem together.

Whilst Joseph's call to obedience in being loyal to a woman with child by the Holy Spirit (v 20) is pretty unique, our walk with Christ will sometimes involve doing the right thing rather than the expected thing because there are times when they clash. St Francis was born into a family of wealthy cloth merchants who lived a life of luxury. Indeed, in his youth he had something of a reputation as a party animal. Yet a period of imprisonment following a battle he was involved in wrought a complete change in him and he embraced poverty and simplicity in a way that still inspires people today (highlighted by the decision made in 2013 by Jorge Mario Bergoglio to adopt Francis as his papal name). Yet at the time Francis's actions seemed inexplicable to those around him and, indeed, at one point he was dragged home by his father and locked in a storeroom.

There will be times when, as Christians, we are called to do things that will involve both a challenge to our own received wisdom and the possibility of us being seriously misunderstood by others. Perhaps that's why Jesus rather ruefully reflected that 'prophets are not accepted in their home towns' (Luke 4 v 24). The first of these is a reminder that we will never have more than a provisional understanding of who God is and what his will for our lives might be. Just as the disciples needed to undergo a major cultural shift in embracing Gentiles as part of the Christian community, so our Christian pilgrimage sometimes involves putting what we think we know about ourselves and God to one side. The Christian life is

not comfy - seeing faith with new eyes means being open to previously unimagined ways of serving Christ. The second is a reminder that when we do follow Christ with all our hearts we may speak and act in ways that don't sit comfortably with everybody. I'm not talking here about deliberately winding people up or the kind of nonsensical and dangerous conspiracy theories that too many Christians in the United States have been taken in by in recent years. It might just be that our thoughts, our words and our actions won't always be fully comprehensible to everyone who adopts the cultural mores of early twenty first century society and therefore following Jesus may be costly in terms of reputation and relationships (bearing in mind as we have in earlier studies that the act of following Christ in some countries means putting your life at risk).

The relationship between Joseph and his peers would never have been quite the same after his decision to stick with the woman who had apparently humiliated him in the most public way possible. Yet, although he has only a couple of brief appearances in the Bible, Joseph had a hugely formative role in the life of his adopted son Jesus. I first visited the ancient ruins of the town of Sepphoris, seven miles from Nazareth, back in 2013 on my first pilgrimage to the Holy Land. At first, I wondered what we were doing there as the town makes no appearance in the New Testament. Yet there is a road, dating from the first century, running through the ruins that Joseph and Jesus would have walked along many times together. As the nearest town to the village of Nazareth Joseph and Jesus would have gone there together often in order to buy supplies and very possibly to do jobs as part of their carpentry business. It may be that the first time they went together Joseph carried his small boy on his back showing him the sights and sounds. We know that Joseph was still living when Jesus was twelve years old (Luke 2 v 41-52) but had died by the time Jesus began his ministry. God entrusted his Son to this loyal, generous, thoughtful and just man who helped lay the foundations of Jesus' ministry by his commitment to following God's will whatever the cost. We don't have to be centre stage to make a difference. Even the smallest act of service can lead to unimagined healing and hope. Whilst not everyone will always 'get' our motives as followers of Jesus, we can take Joseph as an example of what it means to put our faith first and foremost and to live it out day by day.

**Questions:** Why do we sometimes struggle to do God's will? How do we respond when our loyalty to Christ causes complications or misunderstandings in some area of our lives?

**Prayer:** Lord, thank you for Joseph's ability to accept your will for his life. Help us in our daily lives to do what is right even when we don't understand what's going on. Amen.

Thursday March 11<sup>th</sup>: The Samaritan Woman: [John 4:1-26](#):

'I who speak to you am he'

*Sculpture near Sea of Galilee*



Many car satellite navigation systems provide a number of alternative ways of getting from A to B including the shortest route, the fastest route and the most eco-friendly route. They also warn of hazards ahead such as roadworks and accidents and route us around them. Because of the entrenched antipathy

between Jews and Samaritans, rooted in events of past centuries which had not been forgotten, Jewish people wishing to travel north to Galilee often had to take a major detour to avoid the hazardous journey through Samaria (where a racially motivated attack was always a danger) which added considerable time and distance to the journey.

Jesus and his disciples took no such detour but had managed to reach the town of Sychar, not a safe place for a group of Jews to be, without incident. The local well is the setting for an encounter that demonstrates just how radical is the Messiah who the Samaritan woman finds sitting on the well she has come to use. In addressing her and asking her for a drink Jesus is effectively driving a coach and horses through time honoured and deeply ingrained prejudices of his time and culture relating to morality, gender and race. To our minds there is nothing particularly unusual in this encounter; but at that time and in that place Jesus' actions were dynamite.

As Jesus reached across the chasm that separated his people from her people the conversation included the complexities of her own personal life but focused mainly on the offer of living water and the nature of true worship. It's clear that she was someone who found relationships difficult. She has been married five times and presumably divorced five times which would have given her a certain reputation locally (which is why she avoids coming to the well with the rest of the local women in the cooler conditions in the early morning or late evening). Jesus knows all this but starts by asking for her help because he is thirsty; an act in itself

culturally scandalous. But it is important in the context of the conversation that Jesus subsequently has with this woman that she has just done something to help him.

As Christians we very properly put a lot of emphasis on what we can do for others both in terms of meeting the needs we see around us and sharing the Christian message. But being able to receive is also important and often undervalued. Back in the early 1990s I was involved in a project that provided finance and resources for a project to help orphan children in the city of Timișoara in Romania not long after the fall of the communist regime. Whilst we were ostensibly there to help it was extremely important that we also allowed people to give to us. We were invited to meals on many occasions and were very much aware that our hosts were giving to us sacrificially; there really wasn't all that much food to go round and a lot of queueing was sometimes required to get it. Yet if we had refused hospitality and effectively said (not necessarily in words but communicated nonetheless), 'we've come here to give to you and you have nothing of value to give to us' it would have reflected an attitude of superiority which, whether we meant it to or not, would have undermined the self-esteem and offended the hospitable nature of those who simply wanted to give something back.

So Jesus talks about water to one who has given him water to satisfy his thirst in the burning heat of the noonday sun; the conversation could not have taken place without his willingness to receive from her. Of course he is talking about a different kind of water and just as Nicodemus, when he hears the phrase 'you must be born again', can only see a ridiculous mental image of people entering their mother's womb a second time (John 3 v 4), so the Samaritan woman finds it hard to think that Jesus is offering anything other than a supply of drinkable water that will obviate the need to keep visiting the well (v 15). Yet this living or running water is a metaphor for the life and presence of God within the human heart. Jesus is saying that because God is spirit (v 24), worshippers do not have to travel to a specific location to get near to him, whether that be Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim (where the Samaritan Temple stood), instead he longs to find a home in the human heart (John 14 v 23).

This truth has had great relevance for Christians during lockdown as churches have been closed and the only way to access worship is online. For those without internet access the estrangement from public worship has been all the more painful. To know that Jesus lives in our hearts wherever we are and that we can

pray, read our Bibles, sing songs of worship and praise and thank him for his love at home or wherever we happen to be has been of paramount importance. However this doesn't mean that going to church is relegated to being an optional extra; the writer to the Hebrews specifically encourages his readers not to neglect the act of worshipping with others (Heb 10 v 25). So, for example, remembering the sacrifice of Jesus as we celebrate Holy Communion together in church is a hugely formative experience for those who follow him, which is why he commands us to do it (Luke 22 v 19). Yet many clergy also take Holy Communion to members of the church who are housebound, in hospital or in care emphasising that 'place', whilst significant (bearing in mind that Jesus does attach an importance to the Jerusalem Temple in what he says - v 22) is not the be all and end all.

The most important thing about worship, says Jesus, is that it is 'in spirit and in truth' (v 24). When we worship God, whether we are physically in church, watching a service online or reading our Bibles and praying at home, what really matters is that it is a transformative encounter with the living God. We can go to church all our lives and say and sing all the right words but still not have our hearts touched or set on fire. Worship, giving to God what he is worth, is about being open to change; when we truly find room in our hearts for him it will transform us. The Samaritan woman with the complex love life and terrible reputation locally becomes an evangelist, telling those who shun her in the street and snigger behind her back that she may well have found the Messiah (John 4 v 29). She isn't sure but the bravery with which she turns to the community that spurned her and opens her heart to them suggests that real transformation has taken place.

She doesn't understand everything and there is still a journey ahead (which we know nothing about). As we worship, not just with our lips but in our hearts and minds in spirit and in truth, we too know that we are only part way there. Worship is more than lip service, it has to be real and reflect a genuine desire to put God at the heart of our lives. Only when we consciously and intentionally place ourselves in the presence of God can the living water flow. We might feel that, having once known that spring within, the water has become somewhat stagnant and we are somewhat becalmed. The Samaritan woman can inspire us to find who we really are once again. If we feel we are walking through a spiritual desert, this passage offers us living water to drink that will well up to eternal life (v 14). It is by drinking deep that the thirst for God that all humans possess, whether they are conscious of it or not, can be satisfied forever.



**Questions:** What does mean to you to worship 'in spirit and in truth'? How can we prevent our Christian lives from becoming dry and running into the sand?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, as we worship you in spirit and in truth, touch our hearts, open us to the streams of living water you offer us, and enable us to share the water of life with others. Amen.

## March 14<sup>th</sup>: The One who is ‘for us’: [Mark 9: 38-41](#):

‘...because he was not one of us.’

The 2020 presidential election emphasised the fault lines that now run through society in the United States of America. I read recently of one person cancelling Christmas plans and another moving her wedding date in order to avoid meeting family members on the other side of the increasingly wide political chasm that is causing such damaging division. The political question in an increasing number of countries seems to be, ‘are you with us or against us?’



This sort of exclusive mindset has been the cause of some of the deepest wounds of Christian history such as when, in 1054, the Roman Catholic Pope and the Eastern Orthodox Patriarch mutually excommunicated each other causing a tear in the body of Christ that remains unhealed to this day. In 1204, those who had embarked on the Fourth Crusade went even further and destroyed the Christian city of Constantinople, raping nuns and killing indiscriminately as they went about it. To the crusaders, the people of Constantinople were not ‘their kind of Christians’, and were therefore fair game. An

apology, from Pope John Paul II, in which he stated, ‘it is tragic that the assailants, who set out to secure free access for Christians to the Holy Land, turned against their brothers in the faith. The fact that they were Latin Christians fills Catholics with deep regret’, took 800 years to arrive.

In today’s reading Jesus himself is completely relaxed about the activities of the unnamed exorcist who is worrying John purely because he is, ‘not one of us.’ Maybe the stranger had seen Jesus teaching, healing and casting out demons and been inspired to follow suit; we just don’t know. Neither do we know anything about his understanding of who Jesus was and what his ministry was all about. We’ll assume that it was even more limited than that of the disciples whose own grasp on things was pretty shaky at this stage. Yet Jesus doesn’t ask his disciples to grab him and bring him over for a grilling to see what he’s about neither does he

seem at all interested in finding out more about him or regard him as any kind of threat.

The simple challenge to John is that if this exorcist is performing miracles in Jesus' name how can he be an adversary and therefore why on earth should anybody try to stop him (v 39)? Yet still today Christians are looking at other Christians from different traditions and maintaining that they are not 'one of us.' Within the Christian church there have always been different understandings of key elements of the faith such as the Bible, the Eucharist, the Church, the Mission of God in the world and the scope of salvation. It is very important that the conversations we continue to have about all these issues and many others remain friendly, mutually affirming and generous. All too often, however, they are rancorous, spiteful and lacking in any kind of warmth. What so often bedevils the conversations we need so much to keep going is the belief that 'we' (whichever part of the Christian tradition 'we' belong to) are absolutely right in what we believe which means that 'they' are necessarily entirely wrong. This often leads people to look on those who take a different view (which could even be a somewhat nuanced version of what they themselves believe) as not proper Christians at all. Now obviously all Christians believe things about Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection and the way in which his followers should behave in the world today but the misguided belief that you can have this faith thing completely buttoned up betrays a breathtaking arrogance entirely out of sympathy with the generosity of spirit Jesus extends to the unnamed exorcist that John disparages.

Of course, for Jesus, any belief is meaningless if your actions don't stack up; as he says elsewhere, 'by their fruits, you will recognise them' (Matt 7 v 16). It is not necessarily those who prophesy, drive out demons or even say, 'Lord, Lord' who are getting it right. Rather it is those who demonstrate in the way they live their lives that they are attentive to the will of God (Matt 7 v 21-22) who are on a meaningful journey of faith. It is noteworthy that here and elsewhere, as in his dealings with the religious authorities of his day, Jesus reserves his harshest criticism for those who say one thing and do another (Matt 23 v 27-28). That is why the final verse of our short passage is so important; anyone who does something as seemingly insignificant as offering a thirsty person a drink of water in Jesus' name is getting it right (v 41). The clear implication is that all of us who take the Christian life seriously should be prepared to work, worship and pray alongside those who, like the unknown exorcist for John, are not part of our Christian tradition and who may have different understandings, ways of worshipping and ways of doing mission to those we most readily relate to. Which begs the question of how well we know people who attend other churches in our community? So

why not go along to a different church than your own from time to time and get to know some of your fellow Christians who do things differently. And do this with an open heart as one seeking to learn and grow rather than taking into that experience a sense of spiritual superiority.

There is an echo in this passage of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Mat 25 v 31-46) in which those who minister to Jesus himself by feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty a drink, inviting in the stranger, clothing the naked and visiting the sick and those in prison are entirely unaware of what they are doing (Mat 25 v 37). In the light of this I'm tempted to push the envelope a bit further and suggest that anyone at all who offers a thirsty person a drink of water or offers any act of kindness to a fellow human being, whatever their beliefs might be (in other words, people of all faiths and none), are doing the compassionate work that is humanity's shared vocation. What Jesus is implying here is that such people, who show themselves by their actions to be doing the work of God, are in an important sense our partners in mission; something implicitly acknowledged by the fact that, as well as Christian relief agencies such as Tear Fund, Christian Aid and CAFOD, the charities who work together on the Disasters Emergency Committee include the secular agency Oxfam and Islamic Relief. This means that when workers from Oxfam dig a bore hole in a village in Africa providing the residents with access to clean water, or when Islamic Relief feed those facing starvation because of the conflict in Yemen, Christians should rejoice because the thirsty are being given a drink and the hungry are being fed (Matt 25 v 35).

None of this means that our own Christian beliefs are compromised; after all, elsewhere in the Bible Paul quotes Greek philosophers Aratus and Epimenides as part of his presentation of the good news in Athens (Acts 17 v 28) and the compiler of the book of Proverbs includes a section based on an Egyptian wisdom book called The Instruction of Amenemope (Prov 22 v 17 – 24 v 22). The message seems to be that 'even though these people don't believe what we believe, when they are saying and doing good things God is at work'. God is working on a much bigger canvas than is often apparent to us with our limited perspective; something that should both challenge us and make us glad.

**Questions:** Where can you see, both around you and in your own heart, an 'us and them' mentality? How might you challenge this and be changed yourself in the process?

**Prayer:** Lord, give us generosity of spirit, an open heart and the vision to see what you are doing in the world and be part of it. Amen.