

**Tuesday March 9th: 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.