

## Sermon 22 December 2019 Obedience to God (Joseph)

### Matthew 1:18-25

There are two accounts of Jesus's birth in the gospels – Luke's account which is told through the eyes of Mary and this account, Matthew's, which is told through the eyes of Joseph. As the human father, as opposed to the biological father of Jesus (that is an issue which we won't explore today), Joseph is naturally a very important figure. He has a very important role to play in this magnificent and awe-inspiring story, and yet outside of Matthew's gospel, Joseph hardly gets a mention. So today I want to have a look at this character who certainly figures in every Nativity scene being played out around the world right now, and I want to look at him especially in light of his obedience to God.

Who was Joseph? We know he was a descendant of David, so he has the right bloodlines, and yet he was obviously a very humble man. He doesn't appear to have been a man of very many words. Fathers usually have words of wisdom to impart to their children, such as, 'Go and ask your mother,' or 'Do I look as though I am made of money?', but interestingly Joseph is not quoted as saying one single word in the Bible. Not one!

In all the Nativity plays that are performed, Joseph is an important figure but he hardly plays a starring role. There was one exception when a Sunday School was putting on a Christmas pageant and it was going to be an important part of the church's carol service. One boy badly wanted to be Joseph but when the parts were handed out, the part was given to a boy he didn't like. He was assigned to be the inn-keeper instead.

He was pretty upset by this but he didn't say anything to the director and all through the rehearsals he thought about what he might do on the night of the performance to get even. Finally, it was the night of the performance. And here came Mary and Joseph across the stage.

They knocked on the door of the inn and the inn-keeper opened the door, and asked them gruffly what they wanted. Joseph answered, 'We'd like to have a room for the night.'

Suddenly, the inn-keeper threw open the door and said, 'Great, come on in and I'll give you the best room in the house.' For a few seconds poor little Joseph was completely thrown, but thinking quickly on his feet, he looked inside the door past the inn-keeper and said, 'No wife of mine is going to stay in a dump like this. Come on, Mary, let's go to the stable at the back.'

And once again, the play was back on track!

Joseph worked as a carpenter and the impression is that he was widely respected for his skill as such. We do know that Joseph was a religious man and conscientiously observed the Holy Days and religious Feasts. *Every year Jesus's parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. When Jesus was twelve years old, they attended the festival as usual.* Luke 2:41-42.

What is most apparent is that Joseph was not only a man of God, but was very obedient to his God. Joseph discovers Mary is pregnant; they are engaged, not married, and in fact he has not even slept with her. On the one hand, to become pregnant out of wedlock in those days was an absolute no-no, but to compound matters, it wasn't even his child. Poor Joseph, he is about to be both publicly and privately shamed. If ever there was cause to call off the marriage, this was it!

But an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to go ahead with the marriage and that this baby has come from God. *'Joseph, son of David,' the angel said, 'do not be afraid to go ahead with your marriage to Mary. For the child within her has been conceived by the Holy Spirit.'* Matthew 1:20.

Despite the inevitable public shame, despite what people would be thinking and saying, despite his own inevitable doubts, I mean nothing like this had hardly happened before, Joseph has no hesitation in taking Mary under his wing, staying by her side and accepting both her and her baby. This was massive for Joseph. It is very easy for us in hindsight to see that he had no alternative and that this was the beginning of something very special. We know the outcome! For Joseph this was uncharted territory, this was plunging into the unknown. But such was Joseph's faith, such was his trust and obedience, that he in his quiet and stoic way just accepted this was God's will and who was he to doubt it.

There is the story of a young man, Pierre Barlot, who was a gunner during the Prussian siege of Paris. One day he was standing by his gun when General Noel, the commander, came up and levelled his telescope at a bridge in the distance. 'Gunner,' he said, 'do you see the bridge over there?' 'Yes, sir,' he replied. 'And that little shanty in a thicket of shrubs to the left of it?' 'I see it, sir,' said Pierre. 'I believe there is a nest of enemy hiding there. Try it with a shell.'

Pierre looked a little pale but replied, 'Yes, sir.' He took careful aim and fired. 'Well hit, my man, well hit!' exclaimed the general. But as he looked at Pierre he was surprised to see a tear rolling down his cheek. 'What's the matter, young man?' 'Pardon me, General, but that was my house – everything I had in the world.'

There is great integrity in obedience. Joseph was a man of the greatest integrity. What a role model he must have been for Jesus as a boy. I find it really interesting that though Joseph's place in this momentous story is of the utmost importance, and his role is front of stage, we hear absolutely nothing from him and his presence is a very humble and low-key presence.

I think there is a wonderful message there for us. God's kingdom is driven and sustained by the countless people just getting on and doing their little bit. God's kingdom is made up of people of integrity who are obedient to God and who are prepared to serve God without any fanfare.

