

## Sermon 17 December 2023 Trust in God.

### Matthew 1:18-24

Mary is engaged to Joseph and she discovers that she is going to have a baby courtesy of the Holy Spirit. We read about this in Luke 1:30-31. *‘The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and said, “Don’t be afraid Mary, for God has decided to bless you. You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High.”’* To say Mary was taken aback would be an understatement.

But what about poor old Joseph. He is equally shocked when he discovers Mary is pregnant. This sweet, pure young girl he as going to marry is apparently not so pure after all. He was under the impression she was still a virgin, and so he decides to quietly call off the engagement. But then an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and tells him to go ahead with the marriage and that the baby has come from God. I quote from our Gospel reading. *‘An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”’*

When Joseph wakes up, he does just what the angel told him to do and he takes Mary home to be his wife.

Now in the case of both Mary and Joseph, something quite remarkable has happened here, and I am not actually referring to the virgin birth. I am referring to their complete trust in God. It is quite staggering what God has to tell them through his angel, and yet they accept this, apparently without a moment’s doubt.

In Joseph’s case, it was actually in a dream. Now I don’t know about you, but I have dreams every night and some of them are quite weird, right off the planet, though I can hardly remember then in detail the next morning. But Joseph accepts without quibble that this is God speaking to him and he acts upon it without hesitation, even though what God has to tell him is, you might say, right off the planet.

There is a very good lesson for us here, a lesson in trust. Trust is a wonderful thing. Some time ago, author Ardis Whitman, wrote an article entitled, ‘The Courage to Trust.’ In it she recounts that one day, purely by chance, she found herself sitting next to Dr Martin Luther King on plane in the USA. On the opposite side of Dr King was a middle-aged white man from the South. Now we know how deeply embedded in the American South are racist attitudes.

During the flight, Whitman talked to King about the improving relationship between blacks and whites. The middle-aged man from the South was obviously listening to the conversation but said nothing. Finally, he broke his silence and said, ‘My children will have no trouble accepting these things. I have learned to accept them, but my father – he will never accept them.’

Dr King turned to the man and said, very kindly, ‘Your father is doing what he believes is right.’ Moved by the remark, the man said to Dr King, ‘Thank you for thinking that of my father.’

Ardis Whitman goes on to say that Dr King had the wonderful ability to trust that even his so-called enemies, in their hearts, had the desire to do what they believed was right.

If there is one thing Mary and Joseph needed in connection with the birth of Christ, it was trust. They trusted God....big time! I guess it boils down to faith. Trust and faith go hand in hand. Sometimes, it takes a degree of courage to trust God. Both Mary and Joseph displayed significant courage.

The comment is sometimes made that people use religion as a crutch, that only those with a need turn to religion. I would answer that in two ways.

Firstly, it is partly true. We do have a need, we all have a need, and it is a spiritual need. Spirituality is at the core of our existence, it is part of our DNA. There does not exist, nor has there ever existed throughout history any culture which does not have a religion of some nature. The search and exploration of spirituality is a fundamental instinct and that pertains to both the weak and the strong. Mahatma Ghandi said, *'Religion is not a thing alien to us. It is always within us, with some consciously so, with others, quite unconsciously. But it is always there.'*

Secondly, history is peppered with men and women of immense stature who have nailed their religion to the mast, even to the extent of invariably being prepared to give their lives. People such as Thomas Beckett, Joan of Arc, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, Mahatma Ghandi, Mother Teresa – the list is endless. These are not weak-kneed, timorous characters. They are people of standing and of immense courage, and there are thousands more like them. It takes a certain courage to have faith in and trust God, and to live by that faith. It was a trust and faith that both Mary and Joseph possessed, fortunately for us all.

I remind you of the well-known fable of the man walking along the top of a cliff when suddenly a strong gust of wind blew him over the edge of the cliff. A short way down he managed to grab hold of a branch of a small tree growing out from the face of the cliff. There he was hanging far above the rocks below. At that point, a loud voice boomed from above, 'Do you believe that I am God, and that I caused the wind to blow you over the edge of the cliff?'

The man replied, 'Oh yes, God, of course I do, but please save me.' Again, the voice boomed, 'Do you believe I have the power to blow you back up on top of the cliff?' 'Of course, I do,' replied the man. The voice came back, 'Well, let go of the branch.'

The question is this, do we have the faith, the courage to let go of that branch? Mary and Joseph certainly did.

Let me finish with two quotes. *'O my people, trust in him at all times. Pour out your heart to him, for God is our refuge.'* Psalm 62:8.

The second quote is from Martin Luther King and is very pertinent for our message today: *'Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase.'*

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