

Sermon 21 December 2025

James 1:19-25 Matthew 1:18-25

There are two accounts of Jesus' 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 Christian ideology of Jesus being the Son of God (a belief that we won't explore today), Joseph is naturally a very important figure. He has a very significant role to play in this magnificent and awe-inspiring story, and yet outside of Matthew's account, Joseph hardly gets a mention. So today I want to have a look at this character who certainly figures in every Nativity scene played out around the world right now. And I want to look at him especially in the 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 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 doesn't exactly play a starring role. There was one exception when a Sunday School was putting on a Christmas pageant and it was 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 really like. He was assigned to be the inn-keeper instead.

He was pretty upset by this but he didn't say anything 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 a room for the night.' 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 Joseph was completely thrown, but thinking quickly on his feet, he looked inside 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 regarded for his skill as such. We do know that Joseph was a religious man and conscientiously observed Holy Days and religious festivals. *'Every year Jesus' 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 he was very obedient to God. Joseph discovers Mary is pregnant; they are engaged, not yet married, and 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 the 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, for goodness sake, nothing like this hardly ever 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! But for Joseph, this was very much uncharted territory; this was plunging into the unknown, big time! 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. Obedience to a higher authority is a most commendable and meritorious attribute.

There is the story of a young man, Pierre Barlot, who was a gunner during the Prussian siege of Paris in 1870. One day, he was standing by his gun when General Noel, the commander, came up and

focussed his binoculars on a bridge in the distance. 'Gunner,' he said, 'do you see the bridge over there?' 'Yes, sir,' he replied. 'And do you see that little shanty in a thicket of scrub to the left of it?' 'Yes, I see it, sir,' said Pierre. 'I believe there is a nest of enemy 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, 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. If we are to uphold our integrity as believers and followers of God, we need to be obedient to God's call and God's command, no matter how difficult and demanding that might seem: *'Don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.'* James 1:22. 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, his role is front of stage, yet 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. Our church 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. There are many such people gathered here today.

I want to finish with two quotes, which are very closely related. *'If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.'* Isaiah 1:19. *'God doesn't call people because they are better, he calls people because they are willing and obedient.'* Andrena Sawyer, author.