

Readings: Isaiah 11: 1 – 4a, 9-10 Matthew 1: 18 - 25

Immediately before the reflection we sing: *Who would think that what was needed* CH4 295

Reflection: A DREAM, A NAME and A BIRTH

- *Joseph's story*
- *confusion, fear, faith and faithfulness*
- *taking peaceful action even when you do not understand*
- *Emmanuel – GOD IS WITH US*

“God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas Day” – well Joseph certainly experienced some surprises, didn't he? His fiancée suddenly pregnant and the baby certainly wasn't his; the story she told him – amazing in all sorts of ways - involving an angel, a message from God, and a promise about the baby.

1st century betrothal customs in Palestine meant that you made a promise of marriage, often arranged by your family, but the marriage was not finalised for a year. In the meantime the couple got to know each other. Joseph and Mary were at that betrothal stage. We would call it being engaged.

Matthew's version of the nativity story, the story of the birth of Jesus, tells us about that birth from Joseph's point of view. This is Joseph's story – whereas Luke tells us the story from Mary's point of view. We will focus on that in two week's time. Today, however, we think about Joseph and his involvement.

Last week we thought about Joseph's lineage as the genealogy of Jesus, his whakapapa, which begins Matthew's gospel. The words we heard read this morning, about the birth of Jesus, immediately follow that genealogy in Matthew chapter 1. Matthew sets the tone for his gospel and signals what is important to him in this first chapter - grounding the coming of Jesus in the Hebrew past, another chapter in God's story – and Joseph is a vital part of it.

Joseph's story connects with real life then and now; the kind of life that embraces complex family relationships; the kind of life that poses dilemmas that involve several levels of confusion. We might say it resonates with the kind of life many of us lead – maybe seemingly smooth on the surface but in the background are complicated family relationships, and challenging situations. So let's explore some of the depth of Joseph's story and see what message it may have for us.

Joseph was an honourable man – a man who always did what was right - as soon as Mary told him 'she was going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit', Joseph 'did not want to disgrace Mary publicly, so he made plans to break the engagement privately'. Can you imagine how he felt? Mary tells him an unbelievable story. He can imagine that if she is going to have a baby it will not be long before tongues are wagging and people are sneering and sniggering behind his back. He tries to do what he thinks is best for Mary and for him. Yet he is confused and takes time to think about what to do. We can imagine that Joseph was also afraid. Fear often takes over when things happen that we do not understand.

What we know about Joseph from other stories in the gospels is that he was also a practical man. He was a carpenter. He worked with wood. He knew about wood from different trees that was good for different purposes. He knew how to measure, saw and join. He was creative, organised,

meticulous and decisive. When he made up his mind to do something he got on with it. Joseph was also a caring man and took his responsibilities seriously.

While Joseph was still thinking about this amazing story Mary had told him and whether he should break the engagement privately, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. Maybe some of you switch off when someone mentions angels, maybe that is a step too far for you to imagine angels exist. The nativity stories are full of angels – appearing to Mary, to Joseph, to Zechariah, to the wise men, to the shepherds, - but if you can see them as messengers, as the way in which people describe something that so impresses them that they hear it as a message from God, that their world lights up and they are inspired to do something different, then maybe the stories will carry meaning for you too.

The message Joseph received in a dream was like that – he described it as an angel of the Lord who appeared with a comforting and helpful message from God – *Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived. She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus – because he will save his people.* Jesus, like Joshua, means the one who saves. Joseph was also reminded that one of the names by which this child would be known was Emmanuel, meaning God is with us. When God is with us fear is overcome – and caring, decisive, responsible *Joseph woke up from his dream, married Mary, and when the child was born Joseph named him Jesus.* In his dream, Joseph was affirmed in who he was, a descendant of David, encouraged to stop being afraid, assured that the Spirit of God was in this, and given a task to do – but naming the child Jesus meant so much more than giving him a name – it meant that Joseph was to take care of Mary as her husband, and to take responsibility for Jesus as the father who would provide practical care and support.

We see that sense of responsibility and practical care provided by Joseph several more times in the first two chapters of Matthew – he cares for Mary, he names the baby, and after another message in a dream Joseph takes the young child and his mother to Egypt to escape Herod's attempt to kill him. After Herod died, Joseph responds to more angelic messages and takes Mary and Jesus back to Israel, but away from Judea and into Galilee to settle in Nazareth.

Joseph stood by Mary, in very awkward circumstances. We can imagine that he admired her faith and willingness to do what God asked of her – to be the mother of this special child. We can also see faith shining through the actions of Joseph – and faithfulness. He took peaceful action even though he did not understand all that was happening around him. In his confusion and fear he stepped out in faith, and peace, and became an example for us of faithfulness.

Maybe Joseph's story contains a message from God for you this Christmas – if things seem confusing or you are afraid, listen to the angels, those messengers who come to you exactly when you need them – your angel messengers may come in the shape of friends or family, a song or a reading, something that suddenly dawns on you in a new way, - look for them and listen to them. Choose the way of peace over conflict; be faithful in whatever responsibilities you have – and be faithful to God; and remember that God is always with you – around you and within you. You are never alone. There is always hope and the deep peace of God is always there for you. God bless you. Amen.

Our response begins with the Prayers of the people