

**Sermon: Matthew 1. 18 to 25 – Richard Ford**  
**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> December, Fourth Sunday of Advent, (Carol Service)**

Discrimination on the basis of gender! Did you ever think you'd find it in the pages of the Bible? I suspect not!

At today's Carol Services, we're mainly celebrating the birth of Jesus through the eyes of Luke, and if you read Luke carefully, you'll find he doesn't have much to say about Joseph, focusing rather on Mary. But in today's Gospel reading, you get a rather different picture.

If Joseph had been less obedient to that vision in which he was told that it was OK for him to go ahead with marrying Mary, that her pregnancy wasn't due to infidelity, and had divorced her, the circumstances of Jesus' birth might have been rather different.

Or if he hadn't followed the instructions to take Jesus and his wife away from Bethlehem to escape the anger of Herod at the thought of a rival king, an anger that led to the slaughter of all boy babies 2 years and under, Jesus might not have survived childhood.

Joseph plays a significant, protective role in God's plan for the salvation of the world.

And it is through Joseph's ancestry that Jesus fulfils those prophecies that the Messiah will be a Son of David.

And it is Matthew's account of Joseph's first vision, when he is told not to be afraid to take Mary home as his wife and is instructed to give Mary's baby the name, Jesus, that we are reminded of another of Isaiah's prophecies relating to the coming Messiah: "Look the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel."

Emmanuel, a name which means "God with us."

But what, exactly does that mean?

That God is with us is fundamental to our understanding of what was happening in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago. "God with us" is another way of talking about the Incarnation, the idea that God, the creator of

the whole amazing universe, chose to live amongst us in human form. In Jesus, God was, literally, “with us.” And, as John Betjeman puts it in his poem “Christmas”, that baby, visited by the shepherds, was:

“The maker of the stars and sea  
Become a child on earth for me.”

But what about now? How do we understand Emmanuel, “God with us” today?” One of the prayers we use during Advent as we say Morning Prayer includes the request that as “we look for [God’s] coming among us this day,” He will “open our eyes to behold [His] presence.”

Yes, it may be that we can come into God’s presence in Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels or Paul’s teaching in his letters, or in our prayers, but is it possible to encounter “God with us,” God acting in this world, in a more physical sense?

I think it is. Let me give you an example, and one that is relevant to the events that we are celebrating in today’s Carol Services.

Come back with me some 1700 years, to a place, in what we now know as Turkey, called Patara, where there was a bishop by the name of Nicholas. His parents, who had died while he was still young, had been very wealthy and he had inherited their wealth.

In the town where Nicholas was bishop, Myra, lived a very poor man who had three daughters. So poor he was that he wasn’t able to provide them with a proper dowry. And no dowry meant no wedding, and no wedding, of course, meant no husband. And in those days, for a young woman not to have a husband was considered a great disgrace. So their poor father was a very worried man. What could he do to save his daughters from being totally humiliated?

Bishop Nicholas got to hear about this and he wondered what he could do to help the family without them, or anyone else, knowing about it.

Eventually he hit on what he thought was the perfect plan. Each time one of the girls came of age, on the night before, under cover of darkness, he would throw a bag of gold through their window, sufficient to enable them to pay

their dowry, get married and be spared the humiliation of remaining single. Nicholas knew how to use his wealth in God's service.

The plan worked well for the first two girls.

But their father worked out what was going on and he wanted to know who it was who was being so generous to his family, so on the night before his third daughter came of marriageable age, he decided to stay awake and keep watch to see who it was who was giving his girls this very generous present.

However, Bishop Nicholas got to hear about this plan, so instead of throwing the bag of gold through the window, he decided that he would secretly climb up on the roof, under the cover of night and throw the bag of gold down the chimney. He knew the family were so poor that there was no chance of there being a fire in the grate.

Now that night, the third daughter, who though very poor, liked to make sure that her clothes were always as clean and as smart as they could be, had washed her stockings and hung them up at the foot of the bed to dry. And you can guess what happened.

Yes, the bag of gold fell into one of the girl's stockings.

And not only that, some of the townsfolk spotted Bishop Nicholas up on the roof and so the story of his kind and generous act soon spread around the town.

And because of this and other generous deeds performed by Bishop Nicholas, he was made a saint – St Nicholas – the Church celebrated his feast day a couple of Tuesdays ago. And I'm sure that you can work out what has happened to his name since.

Bishop Nicholas, because of the gifts he gave those girls, saved their lives, or at least saved them from a life of disgrace and humiliation. Some accounts even suggest he saved them from a life of prostitution.

It is, I believe, in acts like this, or if you prefer something more recent, in the delivery, yesterday, of food bank hampers to those struggling to cope with the cost of living crisis, and similar such actions that we can see the presence of

God, "God with us," in the world at work today, if only we're prepared to look for them. Amen.