

If we were to take a straw poll this morning, on the question, *Who is the most important person in the Christmas story?*, I would wager, most of us would answer, **Mary**.

Today we shall journey with Joseph, the least mentioned, perhaps least appreciated person in the Christmas story. The only mention of him is in the birth and childhood narratives of Jesus.

Among Jews, Joseph is a proud name, recalling the ancient Jewish name of one of the twelve patriarchs. The parallels between the two Josephs is exciting: the fathers of both Josephs, were named Jacob<sup>1</sup>. The first Joseph was the most loved son of his father Jacob (*narrate the story of Jacob and Rachel*), and Joseph the husband of Mary was most loved by God to be father **to** Jesus; the first Joseph saved his family from death by famine, relocating them to Egypt because he was enabled to do so, and Joseph the father **to** Jesus saved him from certain death from Herod's murderous rampage, because he too, was enabled to do so.

Names have immense meaning, and Mary's Joseph lives up to the deeds and reputation of his namesake ancestor.

Matthew's gospel starts with a genealogy, beginning with Abraham *the father of Isaac...*, and runs through thousands of years of *...the father of...* ending with, (note the change in the flow of the text) *"...Jacob, the father of Joseph **the husband of** Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.*

Luke's account of Jesus' birth is from Mary's point of view and he, understandably, documents her ancestral line (*ch. 3*). Matthew gives us an account of Joseph's part in Jesus' birth and chronicles his ancestry.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 1:2 and 1:16

The Gospel accounts are like a cross between documentaries and social histories written at a different times, each author filling in details to complement the other, helping us better understand what was going on.

We know that Joseph was a carpenter who lived in the town of Nazareth. His ancestors were from Bethlehem, so it is quite likely, Joseph, or his father or perhaps grandfather moved to Nazareth as an economic migrant where there would have been a demand for their skills.

Matthew lets it slip in conversation, that the bemused citizens of Nazareth once remarked, "*Is not this (Jesus) **the** carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?*"<sup>2</sup>, confirming Joseph's trade and reputation (**the** Carpenter), and affirming their family relationship.

Similarly, Mark also lets slip in conversation that Jesus, the first born, followed in his father's footsteps, quoting someone who said, "*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James<sup>3</sup>...?*" It is apparent Joseph was no more at this time; Jesus' identity changed to son of Mary.

So, Joseph apprenticed his Son into the family carpentry business, as any first-born son would have been, back then.

I wonder if Jesus was reflecting on His growing-up years with Joseph when he said of His Father in Heaven, "*the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. What the Son does is always modelled on what the Father does, for the Father loves the Son and shows him everything that he does himself.*"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 13:55

<sup>3</sup> Mark 6:3

<sup>4</sup> John 5:20

It was also the duty of a Jewish father to teach his son their religious faith. We know, Joseph and Mary were devout Jews. They took Jesus to the Temple to be dedicated, eight days after His birth, as was the custom.<sup>5</sup>

We also know, Joseph and Mary celebrated the Passover *every year* by travelling from Nazareth to the Temple in Jerusalem. We are also told, when Jesus was 12 years old, on the return journey from their annual visit to the Temple, Joseph and Mary could not locate Jesus among the travelling group, rushed back to Jerusalem to find Him. Three anxiety-ridden days later, the worried and exhausted parents decided to go to the Temple, perhaps to pray for forgiveness and seek divine direction, only there to find Jesus *"sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions"*<sup>6</sup>, amazing people with His understanding and His responses. When these worried parents asked Jesus, *Son, why have you treated us in this way?* His reply was both appropriate and expected, *Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?*, in other words, *You brought me up in this faith, where else would I be, but in my Father's house!*

One could argue the point, Jesus being the Son of God, would have had the wisdom of God, which explains His ability to engage with the best of religious teachers at the age of 12. This may be true, but it sets a dangerous line of thought: that a father's formal teaching and informal conversations on matters of religion, spirituality, justice, morality, ethics and social behaviour, is of secondary consequence, because God invests His gifts of wisdom and knowledge on whomsoever He chooses. There is truth in the latter statement, but we need to be cautious not to belittle the role of the father.

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:22-24

<sup>6</sup> Luke 2:46

How then do we resolve this? First would be to appreciate that Mary was the mother **of** Jesus, but Joseph was father **to** Jesus. We are not playing with words, but the words illustrate the point.

Joseph was neither an incidental father, nor an accidental father. When the angel told Joseph, "... *You are to give him the name Jesus*"<sup>7</sup>, he was using established Jewish custom and law, to make Joseph, Jesus' legal father. Naming a child was a form of *legal adoption*; in this case, naming Jesus connected him to Joseph's ancestry as a descendent of David.

Biologically, Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit, therefore, rightly the "Son of God"<sup>8</sup>, but legally He is the son of Joseph and heir to the promises God gave to Joseph's ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and others; therefore, He is also the "Son of Man".

Joseph was neither an incidental father, nor an accidental father. Joseph was indeed, Jesus' legal father. He had a legal responsibility for his Son's upbringing, which included discerning God's plan for Him. When we accept this, we can accept Joseph's role as father **to** Jesus.

So, here we have a young man, settled in his profession as a carpenter, engaged to be married to Mary (*we saw what this meant two weeks ago*). After the Angel Gabriel's visit to Mary, she left **in haste** to visit cousin Elizabeth, who lived in a town near Bethlehem, and there she stayed for three months.

From Matthew's account, we can reliably deduce that Joseph found out about Mary's pregnancy, upon her return from Elisabeth's home. How would we know this? Matthew says, *Joseph being a just man, and unwilling to [see Mary made a public spectacle when people found out], resolved [in his mind] to divorce her quietly*. His choice of words (*quietly, unwilling to see*

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<sup>7</sup> Mathew 1:21

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1:32a

*Mary made a spectacle..*) made it clear, no one except Elisabeth knew of Mary's pregnancy, and no one needed to know, if he would have his way.

Imagine the intense struggle in Joseph's mind, his heart, and deep in his soul as he considers the options. Perhaps we should remind ourselves, love is a very strong emotion, esp. in our youth! Betrayal of this love, or even a suggestion of disloyalty, can trigger all kinds of adverse actions, even regrettable reactions!

What was the tone of the conversation between them, Mary trying desperately to convince Joseph, and Joseph wanting equally desperately to believe her. Mary had the Angel Gabriel's word to go by, but at this time, Joseph had only Mary's word to go on.

Mary's prospects were grim. She had after all, agreed to the pregnancy, "*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be to me according to your Word*". The cost of her decision was becoming painfully apparent, as she faced her beloved husband with the news.

How do we respond in times of personal crises? What informs us and gives us when a crisis hits?

Two things: 1) what we believe and whom we trust, and 2) a moral and ethical framework we are taught in early life, and acquired in our formative years, informs our decisions.

The most important question at this stage is, *Why did Joseph believe Mary?* What made him change his plans to quietly divorce her, so as not to expose her to public shame?

We come back, once again, to the matter of faith, faith in God, an expression of the quality of our relationship with Him. The better our relationship with God, the greater our faith in Him, the better we can trust Him with our lives.

At this stage in Joseph's journey, having gone through all the arguments, all the pros and cons, a thousand times a thousand in the silence of his mind, divorcing Mary seemed to be the best possible option based on human wisdom. This is when God intervenes.

God has a master plan which involves everyone. It was not God's plan that Mary should be made a spectacle of, publicly humiliated and ashamed.

God communicates with Joseph four times through His dreams. Dreams are a powerful medium of God's communication, and it takes an intense, daily, living relationship with God, for Him to communicate through dreams.

As Joseph settled his mind on divorcing Mary quietly, God intervenes in a first dream. *Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for what is conceived in her, is of the Holy Spirit.* Being a man whose life was undergirded by the law of God, with whom he has a daily, living relationship, Joseph woke up from his dream and *did as the Angel said, and took Mary to be his wife,* which means he convinced her father, his home was ready for them to start living together. Joseph's life was turned around by God, who asked him to take Mary as his wife, despite all the emotional pressure to let her go; *but Joseph acted in obedience.*

In the midst of this major upset, a money hungry ruler wants to raise more tax money and calls for a census which meant travelling to ones home-town where the family's ancestral records are kept. Joseph had to think quickly: Should he leave his pregnant wife in Nazareth and go quickly on his own, or should he take her on the 100 mile journey? What would happen if she had complications? Should her mother or sister travel with them, just in case?

*But Joseph acted in obedience.*

Third, Joseph's life took another about-turn, when in a dream God directed him to leave for Egypt, and not return to Nazareth. You can imagine the conversation with Mary: but sweetheart, what about our home in Nazareth?, what about my sewing machine?, What will happen to my grandmother's wedding crockery set?. What will happen to.....? *But Joseph acted in obedience.*

Fourth, Joseph's life was upset again, when in a dream, God said, *Return home!* He would have set up a good practice as a carpenter. *Sweetheart, get ready to move. God wants us to return to the land of Israel.*

*Not again Joseph! How will we pay back the advance money given for your work? Don't worry dear. I will work, day and night and finish it. **but Joseph acted in obedience.***

Finally, as they head back from Egypt, Bethlehem would have been the natural place to which to return as it was Joseph's ancestral home. He has to tell Mary, *God does not want us to return to Bethlehem, but return to Nazareth.* Mary would have swallowed hard, her mouth would have gone dry. *Must we face those people again? What will they say? How will they treat me? **But Joseph acted in obedience.***

In each stage of life, to both Joseph and to Mary, God was asking the question, ***Mary and Joseph, if you really trust me as individuals, then learn to trust each other as a couple.***

As we look around the world and see the chaos created by war, greed, failed political systems, bigoted religious sentiments, the human race heading towards the cliff edge, and prepare to celebrate Christmas once again, God is asking us the same question, ***Will you trust me? If you trust me as individuals, will you trust me as a church?***

**AMEN**