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We are on a journey through the familiar Christmas story, discovering the golden thread of **worship** in the lives of those involved. On the first Sunday in Advent we discovered how Zechariah's life of worship gushed out and filled their house and spread into the community around them. Last Sunday, second Sunday in Advent, we discovered Mary's spontaneous act of worship when she was told she would be mother to God's Son, the Messiah, an unrehearsed and instinctive response possible only because of her deep and absolute faith with the Author of Life, Almighty God Himself.

Today we shall examine the life of Joseph, who I feel has often been portrayed wrongly, and not given true credit.

The Gospel of Mathew gives us details of Joseph's life. Before he became a disciple of Christ, Matthew was a tax collector in the town of Capernaum¹. Tax collectors were a despised lot (and still are in some countries!) because the local population felt they were "**forced**" to support the excesses of the Roman government. I find it particularly fascinating how we **label** people. Matthew, perhaps by virtue of having been a disciple of Christ, has been made patron saint of tax collectors, while poor ol' Zaccheus, also a tax collector, is presented as a *reformed villain* after his encounter with Jesus!

Matthew's introduction to his gospel account is quite boring - a list of names, some of which are familiar to us, such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and David and Solomon, ending with another Jacob who was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. But Matthew is not writing to us; he was writing to the Jewish nation of the first century, before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, wanting the Jewish nation to see what they missed: that God's promised Redeemer had actually come, **as promised**, and His work of Salvation had been accomplished, **as promised!**

¹ Matthew 9:9; 10:3.

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Matthew wants his readers to recognise from the start, Jesus' birth was no ordinary matter. His presentation of Jesus' ancestry accomplishes two things: **First**, Jesus is the fulfilment of all the prophetic declarations over thousands of years; hence Matthew's opening declaration "*Here below is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham*". **Second**, while Jews traced their lineage through their fathers, Matthew deliberately recognises mothers: "Perez, whose mother was Tamar," and "Boaz, whose mother was Rahab", referencing specific Old Testament scandals!

Tamar was Perez' mother, but also his sister-in-law. (*A twisted story you can read all about in Genesis 38.*)

Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute, who under the Law of Moses, shouldn't exist in the Jewish community.

Ruth was a Moabite, a people group not allowed to worship at the Jewish temple.

Bathsheba is mentioned as "Uriah's wife." Uriah the Hittite, was one of David's famous mighty men. David wanted Bathsheba for himself, and had Uriah placed in the thick of battle where he died.

This is not the most flattering introduction anyone would want to give to royalty, and certainly not **THIS** King!

Matthew is setting up what the Jews would most certainly consider the biggest scandal of all - the birth of Jesus, but he is a diplomat, and retains the interest of the reader by tracing the male line, through to the life of the man who would be father **to** (not **of**) Jesus: Joseph.

Having traced Jesus' ancestry, organised in three groups of 14 generations each, Matthew then says, "*This is how Jesus the Messiah was born; this is how Jesus' birth took place*", and in as few words as possible, rattles of what might come across as another scandal: "*His mother, Mary, was engaged to*

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be married to Joseph. Before the marriage was consummated, however, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit.”²

If we place Luke’s timeline alongside Matthew’s, we discover that Joseph learned about Mary’s pregnancy after she returned from visiting Elisabeth where she spent three months, so she would have been in her fourth month of pregnancy.

To the reader, this news would have come as a shock! *I am reading the biography of the long promised Messiah, the Saviour who will dispense with death, the one who is God’s Son, who will come from Heaven, and I read that His mother conceived Him before she and Joseph came together? and he did not know of it until she was four months down the line?! What kind of God are you talking about that would allow something like this? How can I worship a God who allows this to happen!!*

Matthew does not spend time gloating over “the scandal” as many present day journalists and reporters might, and skilfully moves on to introduce Joseph, *He was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.*

Several artists have usually painted Joseph as an old man, primarily because the official Church wanted people to believe that such a mature decision could have only been taken by an older mature man. We have no evidence of this; everything we know about Joseph points to a young man who was able to walk 91 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, with his pregnant wife, in her last trimester, to register for the census; who a few months later, was able to “flee to Egypt with his wife and child” in the dark of night, a distance of several hundred miles.

² Matthew 1:18

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Joseph and Mary were a young couple. Going by social norms of that time, she would have been in her mid-teens and he in his early twenties, as most were when they got married and settled down together.

"Joseph was a just and righteous man", an interesting description to say, not only was he well-versed in the law of God, but he also had God's heart of compassion.

Joseph is torn between doing what is right before God, not wanting Mary to suffer any public disgrace, because she could be stoned to death for adultery, and finding something in the legal system which would allow him room to manoeuvre carefully, would have been very stressful. What could he do to "divorce her quietly"?

We can't have evidence of this, but as *Jospeh considered these things*, he might well have been considering other options - what if they moved away from Nazareth? Then no one would know, and gossip-mill would be silenced, but what would happen to Mary in a distant place? She wouldn't have a support network of family and friends.

There is serious tension in Joseph's mind: to do what the law says so there are no comebacks, and yet show compassion towards a young girl whom he dearly loves, who's story of becoming pregnant sounds far-fetched, but she pleads with all sincerity to be believed...!! Sleepless nights, high blood pressure *"as he considered these things"* Matthew says.

Being a **righteous man**, Joseph would have sought God intervention - *What would you have me do? Even I believe her without a shadow of doubt, what should I do?*

I wouldn't think I would be wrong to believe that all of us here, at sometime in our lives, have had thoughts which doubted the integrity of a person, with all the questions that follow: *What do I do? How shall I deal*

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with this issue? What is the right thing to do? What about my reputation? What about the other person's reputation?

If we don't have the proper framework in which to weigh our doubts and concerns, we might end up doing the wrong thing, even when it is with the right motive, and that is something Joseph did not want to happen!

Tired and exhausted with all these confusing thoughts swirling through his mind, Joseph falls asleep. That's when Gabriel appears to him in a dream offering him the guarantee of history, *Joseph, son of David...*, followed by the assurance of God, *Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit...*

What happens next, is an important lesson to anyone who professes faith in God, and in His purpose of salvation.

Joseph puts aside all his anxious thoughts and worrying concerns, because he **knows**, what he has heard is the instruction of God. How does he know this?

Joseph is a *just and righteous man*. His life is built on the framework, of knowing and trusting God's law, and having God's compassionate heart. The answer to his concerns and worry was right before him, and worry made him blind to it - it was so simple! *You and Mary are engaged, and your culture allows you to take her into your home when it is ready. What's stopping you from doing that **NOW!***

Joseph awakes from his sleep and his response is **also** an act of worship! Zechariah worshipped in Awesome Silence, Mary worshipped in Child-like Innocence,... and now Joseph worships in Obedience through Humility.

It takes a very large gulp of humility to swallow one's own pride, to put aside one's own intellect and reasoning, to bury one's own carefully crafted arguments, and accept God's leading.

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Worship through Humility is a lesson for us all to learn. Our own intelligence, our own reasoning, justification, rationalisation, all of which needs to be put aside and surrendered, when faced with the wisdom of God!

As we draw closer to Christmas (8 sleeps left!) let's approach it in the right framework of worship - in hushed silence to consider the awesomeness of what God has done, with childlike innocence to accept what we cannot understand, and with humility, to embrace, believe and trust that which does not make sense.

As powerful as the human mind is, it pales in comparison to God's wisdom. Let's learn to worship Him with obedience through humility.

AMEN.