

**Advent 4** – we think about.... (not Mary but) Joseph!

(before Children go out) are you ready for Christmas? Joseph thought he was ready for a marriage – to Mary – a normal marriage – until her news changed his world and an angel's visit changed him again! More of that later!

### **Sermon**

The story reveals the identity of Jesus. Matthew introduces the birth of Jesus with the genealogy (Matthew 1:1-17). The names in the genealogy are arranged in symbolic sets of 14 (a multiple of seven), thereby signalling that Jesus is the Messiah, through whom God will bring about the manifestation of the Realm of God. The birth of Jesus, for Matthew, is thus an apocalyptic event, the first step in the transition from the old age to the new.

The story indicates how Matthew wants people to respond to the message of the Realm. Mary and Joseph were betrothed, not yet fully married. Neither party in a coming marriage could have sexual relations with an outside person. Mary's pregnancy catches Joseph by surprise. According to Deuteronomy 22:23-27, Mary could be tried publicly and then executed. By resolving to "dismiss her quietly," Joseph seeks to avoid public humiliation while also fulfilling the law. This is a challenge for us who think we know best – that the church has a settled position on social issues – last night Helen and I watched the new film 'The two popes' – looking at the difference between these two leaders of the Roman Catholic church – watch it if you can – how the present pope longs to see the winds of change brought about by the Holy Spirit so that the gospel remains relevant – what might that mean for us as Christians today – what angelic visits have we missed that might mean change for us, personally or as a church?

For Joseph, an angel points out that Mary's pregnancy is the work of the Spirit as part of God's transformation of the old age into the new. The angel challenges Joseph to embrace his role as Mary's husband. Joseph responded positively to the challenge.

Matthew thus presents Joseph as a model for all who encounter the message of Jesus. Joseph was face to face with an unlikely manifestation of the Realm of God. Matthew wants those who encounter this message and this movement in similar fashion to do as Joseph did: To believe the message is of God and to become part of its movement.

This gospel reading also invites listeners to expand what it means to call Jesus "Emmanuel" ("God with us"). I usually hear Christians use this expression to speak of God's intimate presence, especially in difficult times (such as the death of a loved one). The element of comfort is certainly part of the meaning. But Matthew calls something more to mind by citing Isaiah 7:14. According to the prophet, the nation faced a significant threat. However, the birth of a child demonstrated God's intent to save the nation from Assyrian domination. The name "Emmanuel" and the expression "God with us" signal both that significant social transition is about to occur and that the community can live through the anxiety of transition because they believe that it comes from God.

The birth of Jesus, similarly, signals that the end-time transformation is underway and that the community can remain faithful even in the face of conflict and chaos because they can believe the transformation takes place under the aegis of God. The preacher might not only

help the congregation recognize such signs in our world, but consider how ministry of the congregation can become such a sign. Here endeth the sermon

### **Ordinary Joe – An Unsung Hero**

There are many characters in the cast of the Christmas story that have gripped the Church's imagination but there's one that has rarely had a place in the spotlight.

There's the Magi, exotic and somehow still gleaming in their silks after the long, dusty road from the East; there's Gabriel, winged, magnificent, fearsome and gentle, chosen to make an offer that might be refused; there's Simeon satisfied, no, exhilarated by something apparently so small – not even a hope fulfilled, just a hope assured; and, of course, there's Mary, young, vulnerable but open to God's plan and singing out words that will last forever. And then there's Joe. Honest, solid Joe.

The carpenter. The man in the background. Almost always depicted as so much older than Mary, even by Rembrandt. Old enough to be her father – the protector, not the lover, of a young bride. There's Joe ushering the donkey along the road; there's Joe being turned away by the innkeepers; there's Joe watching the Wise Men offer their gifts. No prophetic songs soar from his heart. In fact, the Bible records not a single word of his, and he slips out of the story without even a sentence to mark his passing.

He's a craftsperson, a skilled worker. God did not entrust his son to be fathered by a rabbi or a scribe or a Pharisee or a rich merchant but by Joe. A man who did not need an angel to appear him to change the direction of his life but only a dream with an angel in it. A man who put God's agenda for his betrothed before his own hopes. A man who left his home and his business for the sake of the girl he loved and the God he loved. A man who set aside the sexual expression of his love for Mary until after Jesus' birth, just as his son would set aside the joys of marriage and sexual love. A man who risked Herod's murderous intent and was ready to lay down his life for his bride, just as his son would be ready to lay down his life for his bride – the church.

Is it possible that Jesus learned a thing or two from his earthly father - honest, solid Joe. In an era where we like our heroes articulate, powerful and sparkling, Joe offers a different model. The Bible uses a telling phrase to describe him – he was a good man. Would that be epitaph enough for us? Good old Joe – willing to change his perspective as he listened to the voice of God – what about us? (perspectives)

### **Collect for Joseph of Nazareth**

God our Father,  
who from the family of your servant David  
raised up Joseph the carpenter  
to be the guardian of your incarnate Son  
and husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary:  
give us grace to follow him  
in faithful obedience to your commands;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.

### **Service...**

Like a band of pilgrims,  
we journey ever closer to Bethlehem.  
Now we begin to catch the tension, the excitement,  
of the bustling little town at census time.  
Family members and old friends meet up,  
doors are flung wide in welcome and people embrace;  
but for two visitors with a donkey,  
there is no room, save in a stable.  
Yet safe in each other's company, they trust.  
Safe in the love of God, they await his miracle.  
Let us join them in their devotion.

**Amen.**

Gracious God,  
Solomon's temple was not too grand for you, but neither was a stable too low.  
So we give you thanks that you call both kings and carpenters to be agents of your love,  
and that you call us and meet us in the ordinary places of life:  
at the kitchen sink,  
in the garden,  
on the train,  
in a new born child,  
in bread and wine.  
Enable us to point others to your presence,  
that all may encounter your healing and forgiving love,  
which is your gift this Christmas and always.

**Amen.**

God of all people and all places,  
when the shelves are full but our purses are almost empty;  
when the shops are crowded, but we feel alone;  
when the festive music is lively, but we feel so tired,  
help us to think of Joseph, turned away from a crowded inn,  
of Mary tired after a long journey,  
of Jesus born into poverty,  
but born for us and all who find life hard, especially at Christmas.

**Amen.**

We pray in thanksgiving for Joseph, whom we barely know,  
but who, with Mary, bore the astonishing events of Christ's birth,  
in obedience and with a generous heart.  
When our lives are overturned by the unexpected,  
and you reach out to us in dreams,  
grant us the love and courage of Joseph,  
that we may be open to your prompting

and witness, with him,  
to your loving purposes for all people and all creation.  
**Amen.**

**Blessing and end..?**

God with us, be with me.  
When I am called like Mary, help me to obey.  
When I am tested like Joseph, help me to trust.  
Let me be like the magi, reading the signs of the times.  
Let me be like an angel, a messenger for you.  
Amen.

Go forth as messengers of God!  
Like angels without wings,  
we carry God's glad tidings to a waiting world.  
**Amen.**