

The story is told about the boss who asked one of his younger employees “Do you believe in life after death?” and the employee said “yes sir”. “Just as well” the boss replied “because about an hour after you left yesterday to go to your grandfather’s funeral he called in to see you”.

How do we know when someone is telling us the truth? Well in some instances it’s straight forward. When my soon to be 3 year old granddaughter Sophie denied she had eaten the head of her chocolate santa, the clue to the truth of the matter could be seen in the brown smudges around her face.

But at other times....well, I remember the first time in the police force when I arrested someone; his very strong protestations that he was innocent made me seriously doubt I had the right man. As it happened, I didn’t – it was his twin brother, but that’s another story for a later date.

How do you know when someone is telling us you truth is the question facing Joseph as today, our advent story switches to focusses on him. But what do we know about Joseph? In all the New Testament he never utters a word.

Yet, he’s one of the principle figures in the Christmas narrative and I like to think that Joseph is someone with whom we can all identify – a common man who dared to be obedient to God’s will.

His place in the Christmas story, of course, is that of Mary’s husband. According to Matthew, Joseph and Mary were “betrothed,” but not yet married. Betrothal in a 1st century Jewish marriage was the equivalent of today’s engagement but with a more formal ratification of the event.

During the betrothal period, which usually lasted one year, the couple were legally bound to each other so that, if the man died before the actual wedding took place, the woman would be considered to be a widow. They were actually referred to as husband and wife, but convention dictated that the marriage could not be consummated until after the marriage ceremony.

It’s during this betrothal stage in their relationship that Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant and, though the scripture doesn’t say so, I think it’s safe to say that at the very least he would have been angry and upset. After all, if Mary was pregnant, the only explanation would’ve been that she’d been unfaithful, in which case, he had a legal right to have her stoned to death.

But as we know, that’s not what happened. Instead we see the compassionate side to Joseph. He finds himself in a no-win situation. He couldn’t, in good conscience, go on with the wedding; yet, he couldn’t bring himself either to humiliate Mary, much less put her to death.

According to Matthew, when Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant, he was “unwilling to expose her to public disgrace” and instead planned to quietly dismiss her.

Breaking off the relationship, but not making a big deal of it, seemed to be the most honorable thing to do, and if Joseph’s part in the Christmas narrative ended there, we could understand and respect him as a man of compassion and integrity.

But, as we know, there’s more. According to Matthew, Joseph has a dream in which an angel of the Lord appears to him and tells him that Mary had not been made prgnent by human means and that he should become a father to the child.

And Joseph's response to the angel's instruction in his dream shows Joseph in a new and enriched light – not only as a man of integrity but as a man of faithfulness - not only to Mary but also, and more importantly, to God.

And there is one further example of Joseph's faithfulness and obedience to God when he subsequently names the child Jesus as instructed by the angel and by doing so, sets the scene for the next stage in God's plan of salvation.

Two weeks ago immediately prior to my ordination service I took an oath of allegiance to the Queen and an oath of canonical obedience to Bishop Olivia. These were followed by my having to make public declarations that I would live my life in obedience to the faith that is revealed in the Holy Scriptures as set out in the historic formularies of the Church of England.

But like Joseph, I am being obedient without fully understanding what really happened or knowing what the future might hold. It wasn't as if I had an angel visit me in a dream.

No. I'm here after sixteen years of personal doubt, indecision and uncertainty about whether God had called me to serve here at Holy Trinity as an ordained minister.

I suppose in some ways, the individuals who were tasked with rigorously testing my calling were the equivalent of the angel; “Terry, your call is genuine, so stop prevaricating”.

As for the future...well Jon puts it quite simply by always telling me ...just do what I tell you to do.

Most of us who have married in church in more recent years have entrusted our marriage to a mutual obedience and commitment to married life. Unlike at a friend's recent wedding when there was an audible gasp in the congregation when she promised to obey her husband in her marriage vows.

I didn't really think too much of it at the time, but having made my ordination promises of obedience, on reflection I can see something of Joseph in what my friend and I are aspiring to.

Something to do with getting your own ego out of the way and putting others first. Something about possessing a degree of humility which to paraphrase Romans 8.28, means making a commitment to trust that by God's grace, all things really do work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called to his purpose.

Many scientists believe we are biologically programmed for survival which takes precedent over any relationship we might have established. If our survival is threatened then it is in our DNA to flight or fight; putting our own needs first. Joseph does the opposite and by doing so shows what it means to surrender to God in obedience.

His is an example we can all strive to emulate, not simply as a way of pleasing God, but as a way of living out the destiny that God has called us to. A destiny that might be revealed in a single dream or take 16 or more years to become clear. But always a destiny that by the help of God, we will

fulfill.