

Sunday 18th December 2022: Advent 4: 'The love of the Father' (Matthew 1:18-25, Is 7)

If you've ever bought a nativity set, perhaps you can relate to this experience. You open the box excitedly to check if you've got all the characters. The first one you make double-sure you've got is Jesus: you might have to rummage around a bit, because it's the smallest character: but sure enough, there's the baby in the manger, looking all serene and holy.

Then you check for Mary: and she's much easier to spot – she'll be the one in blue, usually kneeling demurely. The others also tend to give themselves away: there will be two figures in white, maybe with wings – those are the angels, one for Gabriel and one to represent all the others in the night sky over Bethlehem.

Then you'll see three characters in bright colours like purple and red, and you'll know those are the Wise Men. They might be carrying gifts if you've bought an expensive set, but either way you'll know it's them. Then there'll be two or three characters who are in dull green or brown shades, looking like they've been dressed at the first century version of the army surplus stores, usually with straggly beards and gaunt faces – OK, they're the shepherds. If you're lucky, your set will have a sheep... and a donkey, of course.

And what you're left with is one old man. And you're thinking to yourself: there isn't an old man in the story, who on earth is this? And then you count up your other figures and realise that by a process of elimination **this must be Joseph. But why is he so old?** (In the set at one of our churches, he's not just old enough to be Mary's father, he's old enough to be her grandfather.)

Poor old Joseph: one of the great, quiet heroes of the bible, and he's not even given the respect of being shown in 100 million nativity sets as what he almost certainly was: a young man, just like Mary, in the prime of life and ready for what lies ahead. He's already dismissed as having one foot in the grave – and I bet I've piqued your interest now and you're wondering why.

Well, as is often the case, the trouble starts with later generations of Christians who felt that the bible needed extra help and decided to start making stuff up (people really shouldn't do this, you know). So the Gospel of James – which isn't a gospel at all, it's over 100 years after the original apostles – wrote that all the other brothers of Jesus were children from Joseph's previous marriage, *not* ones that Joseph and Mary had together after Jesus was born. This was then elaborated in the 5th century fable 'The History of Joseph the Carpenter' which took this idea one stage further and declared that Joseph was a 90-year-old widower when he meets and marries the 14 year old Mary!

It's complete nonsense, of course – but it's the sort of tabloid-headline nonsense which is more exciting than the truth. The one scriptural fig leaf that was found is the fact that when the adult Jesus goes back to Nazareth as an adult and is rejected (Mark 6), the people there refer to him as 'Mary's son'? This is taken to mean that Joseph has died (and therefore must have been older than Mary), rather than what it almost certainly was: hometown gossip which knew the stories about who Jesus' father was: "he might be Mary's son, but we're not sure he's Joseph's".

If I can achieve one thing in these few minutes, it's to try and set the record straight and honour Joseph as being the remarkable person that he was. **A man of great faith**, able to receive angelic visions and act upon them; **a man of great humility**, willing to accept a child that wasn't physically fathered by him and endure the gossip which was still flying around in Nazareth 30 years later; and **a man of great obedience**, marrying Mary and creating the strong and healthy family that not only raised the son of God but also two of the great early leaders of the church: Jesus' half brothers James and Jude.

I've called this talk 'the love of the Father' and I've got two fathers in mind. We'll get on to the obvious one in a moment: but let's start by paying tribute to the love of Joseph the human father. Matthew's description of what happened before Joseph and Mary married gives the basic facts, but doesn't give us any insight to the anguish, the heartache, the moral dilemma which would have kept Joseph awake at night. We mustn't forget that, according to the Law, the right thing for Joseph to do was to disown Mary. Indeed, that is what most of the village would already have done, who knows maybe even her own family. And he could have done this very publicly and dramatically, and received great popular approval for it. In fact, the option he has in mind is the most pastorally sensitive way of doing the right thing, which is a quiet divorce.

To do what he did instead – to marry her anyway, to choose to share the jibes which Mary would suffer for the rest of her life and support her selflessly through it, is **a quite remarkable act of self-sacrifice, in its own way as impressive as Mary's.** It is as good an example of the love of a human father as you'll find in scripture.

And of course, it points beyond Joseph to another Father – the divine Father. Joseph in his own small way is offering as a human father to Jesus a glimpse of the much greater love of his Father in heaven. The name Jesus means 'God saves', and if it was Mary's privilege to bear Jesus, it was Joseph's to *name* him (v21, v25). And the name points to God's love: that the Father in heaven loved the world so much that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life: in other words, Jesus came to save us as an act of the Father's love.

It's hard to know how much of this Joseph grasped as he said yes to God's mission for him. But we do know that **he stayed faithful to that mission**: taking the family to Egypt, then returning them safely a few years later; taking Jesus on pilgrimage to Jerusalem regularly enough that Jesus came to know the temple as his Father's house; and taking him to the synagogue in Nazareth weekly, which became Jesus' custom as a grown man.

Many people have had mixed experiences of human fathers: but Joseph points us to a greater Father, the divine Father – and this Father is the one we can celebrate today, whose love sent Jesus, to save us from our sins. May that love be ours, and may it inspire us to the same faithful service which inspired Joseph, the quiet hero of the nativity story. Amen.