

Year A Advent 4

Isaiah 7: 10-16

Romans 1: 1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Thank God for Joseph!

In Year A of our three-year cycle of readings, today we heard about Joseph and his critical role in the nativity story. Mary, of course, gets the starring role and most of the attention in the other two years' readings in Advent.

So why does the author of the gospel ascribed to Matthew choose to major on Joseph, not Mary the mother of God, who surely should get all the credit and be in the limelight?

Well, Matthew, from the very beginning of his gospel, calls Jesus the Messiah. Matthew sets out to let the reader know not just about the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, but to make abundantly clear to the reader that Jesus was the long-awaited deliverer of God's people, Israel. Matthew sets out how, in the birth of Jesus, all of God's purposes for his people were now being fulfilled. And Matthew frequently used the Hebrew Scriptures – what we call the Old Testament – to help provide testimony to what Matthew describes in his writing.

Matthew's gospel starts with, in a very close translation of the Greek, 'The book of origin of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham...' Those first four words, 'The book of origin' in Greek are 'the book of Genesis'. So, Matthew is starting out with a very clear

message that Jesus is the fulfilment of Scripture, from the beginning of time.

In the text we have read today, from verses 18 to 25 in chapter 1, Matthew provides the first of five quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures in the birth narrative, that he wanted to show as proof that Jesus was the Messiah. He crafted his narrative using the scriptural quotes, all designed to back up his case of presenting Jesus as Messiah.

Matthew's aim in verses 18-25 was to guide us to see that this most unlikely person, Jesus, was the Messiah, the son of David. But did that mean he selectively looked for quotes and bent and squeezed them to suit his purpose? I don't think so. His readers were not stupid and were probably as critical in their thinking as any 21st century reader may be. I will come back to this point later.

In v 19 we find out that Joseph is a righteous man. This meant he knew and abided by the Jewish laws. It also meant that he knew well enough what the Jewish laws said about someone being pregnant out of wedlock, and, of course, he knew for certain he wasn't the father. He was entitled to publicly repudiate Mary, to shame her, and leave her to a not very pretty fate, either of being killed or of living by begging and/or prostitution.

But Joseph was clearly not just righteous, but also compassionate. We know little about what anguish he must have been in, and how many sleepless nights he may have experienced before deciding that he should quietly end their relationship. From this minimal insight as to his character, I think we can safely extrapolate that Joseph was a kindly man, not egotistical or loud, just concerned to be a good Jew, meeting the terms of the Law as best he could, and keeping his head down, doing a decent day's work and scratching out a living as best

he could. Well, that's my pen picture – I leave you to make your own mind up from the scraps of evidence we have.

We know that God had other plans for Mary and Joseph – it didn't include Joseph disowning Mary. God intervened as only God can. In a dream Joseph was rather politely asked by an angel of the Lord, who addressed Joseph as a 'son of David', to change his mind; to marry Mary for she was carrying a child conceived by the Holy Spirit. And most significantly, Joseph was told that he must name the son she would have, and to name him Jesus.

And why was this last part of the angel's instructions so important? In those times, it was the father's right to name the child. So, in naming the child Joseph is indirectly stating that he is the legally recognised father. And in naming him, Jesus becomes part of the lineage descending from King David, and is rightly able to be called 'son of David'. If Joseph hadn't acceded to the angel's request, I wonder if the story would have come to a pretty dismal end, there and then!

Matthew's choice of referring to the prophecy in Isaiah ch 7, that was our first reading today, is interesting. We need to be clear that the writer, who is called the First Isaiah, was not prophesying about the birth of Jesus, an event about 700 years in the future. A prophet was always offering God's word for the people in their times. Isaiah's prophecy relates to Ahaz's wife. Isaiah is warning of the imminent devastation of Judah by the invading Assyrian army – an event that would happen before Ahaz's son, Immanuel could grow up.

Matthew's use of Isaiah 7 was not intended to show the fulfilment of Isaiah prediction after 700 years, but rather, Matthew was pointing to the recurring patterns of how God chooses to deal and interact with his people, Israel. Matthew was confident that the Hebrew

Scriptures gave ample evidence of repeated and determined interventions by God, and that the people needed to be alert to seeing them and responding accordingly. On that basis Matthew was using the example of the prophecy in Isaiah 7 to show that God was once again interacting with his people, in the birth of 'the son of David', whose name means 'he who saves'.

Today, we have had a brief insight into the character and personality of Joseph built up from a few meagre verses in Matthew's opening chapter of his Gospel. It confirms that he played a critical role in ensuring that the son of God, born of Mary, could be the 'son of David's line', as had been prophesied. We have also gained a glimpse from the opening chapter of Matthew's gospel as to how Matthew utilised the prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures not by trying to show that the prophets of old were directly prophesying to the coming of Christ many centuries before, but by showing that God's patterns of reaching out to his people recurred throughout time, and this intervention by God was happening once again, but this was the fulfilment of God's ultimate promise, God's salvation for his people, being fulfilled in the birth, life and ministry of Jesus, 'he who saves'.

Joseph gets to be centre stage for this one week. I wonder what, on reflection, you make of this rather hidden figure. I say, thank God for Joseph, compassionate, caring Joseph.

Footnote (not said in the sermon)

Incidentally, in the very last verse of today's reading from the gospel, there is an interesting sentence... 'he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her *until* she had given birth to a son...'

That sentence, including the key word 'until' rather puts paid to the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity. There is no Biblical authority for this dogma. In the second century it was proposed (in the non-canonical Protoevangelium of James) that Joseph was an old man when he married Mary, and the 'brothers of Jesus' were in fact Joseph's children from a previous marriage. There is no evidence to support that notion either.

And to cap it all, in Matthew 1, v 23, the Hebrew word translated in to English as 'virgin' is not completely accurate. The Hebrew word is 'alma', meaning a post-pubescent female; it does not imply one way or another if the female is a virgin. Hebrew for 'virgin' is 'betula', and Hebrew for wife or woman is 'issa'. Make of it what you will...