

Advent 4, Eucharist

Isaiah 7: 10-16, romans 1: 1-7 and Matthew 1: 18-end

Mother Emma

Today's candle on the Advent wreath is traditionally lit for Mary, and our prayer reflected the annunciation of the birth by Gabriel to Mary, so wonderfully described by Luke in his Gospel.

But there is, as we just heard, another version of the annunciation story, less frequently read in church, or depicted in art, or even reflected upon.

Joseph's story is told only by Matthew at the beginning of his Gospel, and so we hear it only every three years in Year A of the Lectionary, during which all the readings are taken from Matthew's account of the life of Jesus.

Whilst Luke emphasised that Jesus came for the poor and the marginalised in society, and so focussed on, among others, women like Mary, Matthew wanted to make clear to his readers the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures throughout his account of Christ's birth, ministry, death and Resurrection.

For him, it is Joseph, with his genealogy leading back all the way to King David, which makes it possible to see Jesus as the continuation of God's promise to David that his family would sit upon the throne forever.

But is often hard not to feel a bit sorry for Joseph, who otherwise exists very much as a shadowy figure in the background of the Christian story and tradition.

He lurks – often silently - at the back of Nativity depictions and plays, and is never mentioned again by name, just once or twice in connection with Jesus' youth as "the child's father" or "the carpenter."

Many theologians have therefore assumed that Joseph died at some point before the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and for Roman Catholics, he remains the patron saint of the dying, as he died (we assume) in the presence of Jesus and Mary, as a good Catholic might hope to do.

As a carpenter by trade, Joseph is remembered as St Joseph the Worker, the patron saint of those who work with their hands.

He is also sometimes thought of as the saint of hopeless causes, or even "hope of the hopeless".

So where do these traditions originate from?

In what way might we see Joseph as someone who would empathise with and therefore help the hopeless?

It is true that he finds himself in a very tight corner, as a man in a patriarchal society, apparently betrayed by the woman engaged to be his wife.

Jewish Law at the time dictated that a bride found to have been unfaithful should in the worst case be stoned to death, and in any case should be divorced or publicly "repudiated".

Joseph, we are told, was a good and righteous man.

The implication is that he was a devout follower of the Law but also a compassionate person, who in spite of everything had pity on Mary.

His initial instinct is therefore to divorce her in accordance with the Law, though without exposing her to those who might feel the only way forward for an adulteress was to stone her, even if his

own honour would be affected once it became obvious to others that Mary had fallen pregnant during their period of betrothal.

But Joseph, the devout Jew and descendant of David, receives a message in a dream from an angel of the Lord, as many of the great Old Testament figures also do.

The angel addresses Joseph as “Son of David” – harking back to his ancient royal ancestry.

He comforts Joseph by reassuring him that the child Mary carrying is a child of God and part of God’s plan for the world.

In instructing Joseph that HE is to name the child (and telling him what to name it), the angel is offering Joseph a way to demonstrate to the world that he accepts the child as his own, and is taking on the responsibility for his upbringing and care.

And the child is to be called Jesus, or in Hebrew “Yeshua”, meaning “God saves” - the same name as Joshua, who, in the Old Testament saved the people of Israel from the wilderness and brought them into the Promised Land – so, too this Jesus will rescue the people of Israel and bring them into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew at this point takes the opportunity to explain to us, his readers or hearers, that all these things will take place in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah which we heard in our first reading, “Look the young woman is with child and will bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.”

Do we assume that Joseph was sufficiently versed in the Hebrew Scriptures that this connection would have been obvious to him?

In any case, he reacts to the angel’s visit just as the ancient patriarchs all did when brought a message by an angel of the Lord, “He did as the angel had commanded him.”

Just as Abraham left his ancestral home to travel to an unknown land, and later prepared to sacrifice his only son, so Joseph accepts responsibility for a wife whose commitment he may secretly still mistrust, and for a child who is not his by blood.

He shows obedience to God’s will, even in the face of public gossip and condemnation, of hurt and suspicion.

Perhaps it is this which has earned him that reputation as one who understands faith and acceptance in an intractable situation, and whose story can offer hope to those who can see no hope.

Sometimes, we too are faced with seemingly painful, unexpected and impossible situations.

Perhaps the story of Joseph, which in spite of very unpromising beginnings, makes possible the realisation of the glorious story of God’s incarnation at Christmas, a story which we shall be celebrating with awe and joy over the next week, can offer us hope in our own difficulties.

At Christmas we remember not only those who share the joy and the excitement of Christ’s birth at Bethlehem, but also all those who face this season, like Joseph, with mixed emotions, painful uncertainty or apparently irreconcilable difficulties.

In Joseph we see that even in situations which seem opaque and deeply unsettling to us, we may trust that God’s plan is gradually being brought to fulfilment.