

Jesus' Family Tree 4: JOSEPH

Matthew 1:18-25 [MW19-30]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 22 December 2019

There are a number of “Josephs” in the Bible: for the record,

- in my 'Dictionary of the Bible' this particular Joseph is listed as:
“Joseph, husband of Mary; the husband of the mother of Jesus”
- this Joseph who we are looking at today in Jesus' family tree
this Joseph, is mentioned only a few times in the New Testament
almost exclusively in the birth and childhood narratives of Matthew and Luke

These are not primarily historical records

- though they do contain valuable historical data
these birth narratives aim to show that Jesus belonged to the line of David
the Great King of the Hebrew people, the people of God
- Matthew and Luke wish to affirm not that Joseph was Jesus' actual father
but that Joseph was the legal foster father of Jesus
- both Matthew and Luke agree that Joseph's family's historic connections
were with Bethlehem
though the details vary a little

Now, on to the real nitty gritty

- at the time Joseph discovered Mary's condition, that she was pregnant
he was legally betrothed to her
- according to Jewish custom betrothal was almost, almost, marriage
carrying the same rights, responsibilities and consequences
- the length of betrothal in the case of a young maiden, a virgin
was about a year
- if her intended husband should die beforehand, she became a widow
with all that entailed ... but we do not need to go there

No, there was quite another sort of problem that raised its head

- in the case of Joseph and Mary
Bible scholars usually look at Matthew's gospel
and see it pointing towards Joseph suspecting Mary of being unfaithful
- or to put it even more strongly
as such a thing would have been seen in Jewish eyes: adultery

Joseph is described as a just man

- good, righteous in the sight of God
so he did not fly off the handle or do anything rash
- he was a devout servant of God
he regulated his life by the standards of the law
- he was also kind and wise

Which is just as well when you consider the situation he found himself in the middle of
with his young bride to be

- scholars say Joseph's character and deep faith is shown
by his glad response to the revelation which came to him in a dream
- nothing untoward had been going on
Mary was quite innocent of any wrong doing

Mary was to be the mother of the Saviour of Israel

- Joseph was to have no fear of proceeding with his plans with respect to Mary and their future life together
- and, as they say, you know the rest of the story ...

Most of what we actually know about Joseph we have to infer from the Biblical record

- it says a lot for this man that he could adapt to the change in his situation with barely a hitch
- he seems to have been a quiet, strong person with an extremely deep faith and an equally deep love for Mary and later for Mary's son
- he handles messages from angels and the knowledge that he will act as father to the son of God with remarkable graciousness and courage

Maybe that was the practical down to earth side of Joseph

- he got on and did what had to be done protecting his family providing a home, stability, security
- working at his carpentry trade observing the usual customs and rituals of Jewish life

Joseph is pictured as a true father

- sharing with Mary the anxiety of the search for the twelve year old Jesus when he is missing as they return from the visit to the Temple in Jerusalem being perplexed at Jesus' statement about belonging in his 'Father's house'
- apparently Joseph's authority in the home was respected by Jesus and, finally, Luke represents Joseph as a faithful and affectionate father to Jesus

And that's it, that's all they wrote

- no headlines for: Joseph, husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus no rave reviews
- and yet surely one of the, if not *the* most important, well-lived supporting parts in the history of God's relationship with his people

Joseph

- dependable, supportive, secure

According to the books of saints, Joseph gets, as you would expect

- a great write up and his own day (anyone know when?) March 19
- our New Zealand *For All the Saints* concludes the entry on Joseph like this:

Later Christian writings attempted to supply details of Joseph's life, but they have no historical foundation. Since other members of Jesus' family are mentioned in the ministry of Jesus whereas Joseph is not, it is presumed that Joseph died before Jesus' ministry began. Veneration of Joseph developed in the eastern church from the fourth century, but it was much later in the western church, being promoted there from the fifteenth century.

And that's it for the record:

- Joseph, husband of Mary; earthly father of Jesus; faithful servant of God

Now we might be tempted to leave it there

- however with the other people we have highlighted in Jesus' family tree we have asked:
 - what is the Good News here?
 - what can we learn from them?
- how may they encourage us as we seek to celebrate and faithfully follow?

I believe C. S. Lewis summed it up very well in the case of Joseph:

The grounds for belief and disbelief are the same today as they were two thousand or ten thousand years ago. If Joseph had lacked faith to trust God or humility to perceive the holiness of his spouse, he could have disbelieved in the miraculous origin of her Son as easily as any modern man; and any modern man who believes in God can accept the miracle as easily as Joseph did.

I think it is important for us to actually "meet the man"

- so I invite you to imagine the stable, in Bethlehem on that night so long ago
- imagine Joseph, master carpenter
 - rough clothes, placid temperament, twinkle in his eye
- a man who can talk easily about God without sounding "all religious"
 - a man who takes satisfaction from a job well done
- his attitude to the new-born baby is very matter-of-fact
 - he is sitting, holding the baby, talking seriously

This is a monologue by Paul Burbridge and Murray Watts titled 'Stable Talk'

What a world to come into, eh? Hustle and bustle. Everybody travelling away from home, filling in forms, being pushed around. People shouting. And how do you like it, after four hours or so? Mmm? *(Pause)* Your mother's asleep and those nice shepherds have gone home and if you could open your eyes, I'd show you a lovely star, wouldn't I? *(He gets up and stands looking upwards)* Through the holes in the roof. *(He chuckles)* What a fine time to come, eh? I had a feeling you were going to do this to us. And we had a nice room all ready for you back home, see? I made you a little bed. Proper little bed, all planed smooth with no nasty splinters. I set it on rockers and carved a little lamb into the headboard. You'll see it when we get back to Nazareth. You'll like it. Well, I hope so, because I wouldn't like you to think your father wanted you to be born in this old feeding trough.

(Carefully, he puts the child back in the crib) One of the legs is a bit wobbly. Well, that's nails, you see. Never trust nails. That should have been jointed, good and proper. Takes a little care, that's all. And now I've got to take care of you as well. *(Peering solemnly at the sleeping baby)* I know who you are, you see. You don't know who I am, though, do you? *(He sighs)* I've not really had anything to do with you. *(He sits and then begins again, as if introducing a new topic of conversation)* I wish I was your father - you're so beautiful. But I'm just standing in, as you might say, for someone else. Well, at least you won't have people saying, 'Oh look, he's got his father's nose!' That's something to be grateful for.

But do you know what I think? *(He takes a deep breath)* I think you are going to have your real father's temperament. Because, you see, your father is a loving, kind, mighty, glorious, everlasting God. *(Pause)* And - *(He leans over confidentially)* the angel in my dream told me that you are going to save your people from their sins ... which does seem a lot to ask of a little chap like you.

But I think I shall be pretty proud of you anyway. You're still part of my family, you see. And it's a good family. Oh, yes. We go back a long way. I may only be a carpenter, but your great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather was King. There. He was. King David. (*Musing to himself*) We've had kings, priests, farmers, carpenters and now we've got a king again ... I think I'm a little bit chuffed about that.

(*He gets up and strolls around*) In fact, I'm really delighted. I'm so happy, I might even sing you a song in a minute but you might cry, so perhaps I'd better keep quiet. You just carry on sleeping - I'll keep an eye on that star and make sure nothing happens to you as long as I'm alive.

[pause for reflection]

Joseph encourages us to believe – more than that, to believe in the 'miraculous'
- to have faith, even when we may not understand
and to have the humility to carry on in the way that is before us
knowing that somehow God is at work in it

Let me conclude with this poem titled “Joseph's Song”

*I'll make her comfortable
in this dark place,
steamy with cattle breath,
While we await his coming*

*As the boy grows stronger
and wiser
I'll fade,
Footnote in the story
of this child.*

*But a man can dream and have visions.
Perhaps someday I, too,
Shall be called blessed.
For in these moments I shall behold
The birth of Glory!
God come to us,
In starlight and straw.*

Howard H. Remaly