



# *Fourth Sunday in Advent*

## *Sermon by Revd Sharmain James*



Sunday 18 December 2022

### READINGS

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

## *Joseph the forgotten man*

May I speak to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit who uses ordinary people to do the unexpected. As I read the gospel reading for today – I couldn't help thinking: - What would Christmas have looked like without Joseph? Jesus' step-father. How would the world's most well-known story, - the source of countless millions of Christmas productions, songs, and little figurines have changed if Joseph had not been present?

It seems that most of the attention around Christmas centers on Mary and the baby Jesus. The song "Mary Did You Know?" has captivated millions because it draws attention to these powerful truths. Many other songs have been written about that night. Mary has quite a few, - the shepherds get their mention, the wise men get a memorable tune in their honour. But it is harder to find songs about Joseph. If ever there was a male figure whose contributions and faithfulness have been shunted to the side, it is Joseph. Luke barely mentions Joseph. - Matthew is the only one that gives Joseph his moment. - Today's Gospel focuses on Joseph.

In all three cycles of our Sunday readings, the only Sunday that Joseph receives attention is this Sunday – the fourth and last Sunday of Advent, Cycle A.

When we meet Joseph, he is engaged to Mary and learns that she is pregnant. But, interestingly enough, he doesn't even get a chance to ask a question "How can this be" – or asked Mary - who is the father- or voice his opinion. Joseph is somehow rendered speechless. He's not even given a small speaking role. As a righteous man – he should respond by not taking Mary into his household. But ending things between them was complicated. It wasn't like he could simply break things off by asking for his ring back. An engagement was a legal contract between families - under Jewish law – and other than death – it had to be broken legally. Mary was legally and socially considered Joseph's wife – even though she still lived in her parents' house. The question was, should he make an issue of her unfaithfulness or divorce her quietly?

Joseph who was compassionate, as well as righteous, decided to do the latter. He will quietly break off the engagement with no explanation to the community. Try to pick up the pieces of his life and free Mary to marry the man who caused the problem in the first place. And having made up his mind, Joseph went to bed and then something extraordinary happens. Just as extraordinary as the Virgin birth, Joseph has a dream and in it he hears words that are directed to him. Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife for the child conceived in her is from the Holy spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.

Joseph believes the dream and Matthew tells us, “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife.” Joseph accepted the invitation to participate in God’s plan of salvation, just as Mary had already done. He discovers that being righteous is not about being pure or perfect or trying to make and keep God happy, but, joining one’s heart with the heart of God and being about God’s redemptive work in the world. Deciding and acting from his heart, Joseph knows what he must do, no matter the cost to him or his reputation. Joseph woke up and He went against the Jewish law in favour of the covenant between people and God.

He decided to trust in the leading of the Spirit, to trust in the journey of faith. He trusted enough to name the child, which is the eternal invitation. He accepts his destiny to help God “father” into the world the Christ, the saviour of all people. So, that’s Joseph’s part in the Christmas story. God used an ordinary, righteous man to receive and care for Jesus the Messiah. So we see, Joseph’s role is vital to the positive outcome of the Christmas story, and yet poor Joseph is often overlooked. In Matthew’s reading we see it is Joseph who grappled with the unexpected and upsetting intrusion of the Holy Spirit into his nicely planned life. In Matthew, the whole miracle of Christmas - rested on Joseph’s shoulders, awaiting his freely chosen decision to either accept or reject the stunning news of an impending Messiah - and the shocking way in which this salvation would enter the world.

Even though - scripture records no words of his, what is known about Joseph, comes from his actions, which express an openness to the word of God and a willingness to carry it out, no matter the cost. At this time of year when we all become a little more aware of our own blessings and the needs of others, we see that Joseph practiced, welcome; openness, warmth, kindness and generosity. He opened his heart and spirit, his home and his whole future, to the intrusion of the divine. The courtesies Joseph freely offered Mary were extensive. He gave her his name - which safeguarded her reputation and welfare as well as gave the expected child the authority of a Davidic heritage. But Joseph did not just give Mary his name and then set her aside. Not only did Joseph keep Mary with him throughout the duration of her pregnancy, during this time he did not try to make her take on the intimate duties of a wife.

Joseph’s dedication to Mary was so complete that when he travelled to Bethlehem for the ordered census - as recorded in Luke’s Gospel - he took her along. She was his family now, no matter what her condition or how her pregnancy had come about. She was so thoroughly his wife that he did not dream of leaving her name off the official Roman role-call being taken. Joseph, was called, just like Mary, to play his own unique role in God’s plan of salvation. He had to trust in God, and not be afraid to do much more than take Mary as his wife, and Jesus as his son. Later it took faith to trust that he no longer had to be afraid to bring them back home to Nazareth. His integrity and faith in God are examples for us.

As someone else wrote about Joseph: “Joseph stands as an outstanding example to every believer as he exercises extraordinary faith in submitting to God’s plan”. So thanks be to God for Joseph and all the Josephs in the world and the “Joseph” in you and me. Confronted by God’s scandalous ways of loving the world, Joseph discovered something that is true for each of us. He discovered in the dream that - your life is not your own. It doesn’t belong to you to do as you wish.

We have been entrusted with life so that our lives can help “father” God’s hope into the world—and “mother” that love, into the world. Joseph shows us that our lives—as small and insignificant as they are or seem to be—are embedded in a much larger story of God’s mission of redemption and reconciliation. God breaks into human history bringing divine plans to fruition through ordinary people – like you and me.

Mary and Joseph were essential to the plan.

Mary had to consent to the pregnancy and Joseph to the marriage. God rarely acts in history with this sort of intervention. Like Joseph - We are essential characters in God's ongoing story. We are part of this story that's still being told.

As we journey these last days to our celebration of Jesus' birth, our eyes should be open anew to how God is giving us the opportunity to respond to a divine invitation. Let's go into Christmas this year well-prepared to receive Christ, with our hearts warmed up through the obedience of faith.

Amen