



CHESTER
CATHEDRAL

Fourth Sunday of Advent

18 December 2016

Matthew 1 18-25 Isaiah 7 10-16

At the airport customs, it is said that Oscar Wilde was asked, 'Do you have anything to declare?'. He replied with some flamboyance and for all to hear, 'I have nothing to declare except my genius'. We laugh at his wit and his blatant arrogance. Oscar Wilde's personality is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Joseph, the husband of Mary and the focus of today's gospel. Joseph, unlike Oscar Wilde, could well have spoken the words by John the Baptist in John's gospel, when he said, 'He (meaning Jesus) must increase but I must decrease'.

It's the fourth Sunday in Advent – only 7 days until Christmas! Every Sunday for the last three weeks, we have lit a candle to take us through Advent towards Christmas day. There is a surprising amount of variation in interpretation of the meaning of the candles - some say the fourth Sunday is when Mary is remembered. In today's gospel, we do not hear particularly about Mary but far more about Joseph. We light no candle for Joseph in the Advent wreath because, important as he was, he was a lesser cog in a much larger wheel.

In the central panels of stained glass in the West window of this cathedral, Joseph stands rightly next to Mary who holds the infant Jesus. The window casts brightly coloured reflections on the walls, floor and chairs when the setting west sun shines through the panels. It is a beautiful sight to remind us of the light shining through the saints. I have given you a photograph of Joseph to take away to remind yourself of him. Not surprisingly Joseph

figures only a few times in the gospels. We first read his name in Matthew's genealogy and then in the accounts of his dreams: in the first dream God tells him that Jesus is God's son and in the second to flee to Egypt with his family. Later, we see Joseph searching for Jesus the young boy, lost in the temple. Joseph is absent though, from the wedding of Cana, the last supper and the death of Jesus. Some have speculated that he died even before Jesus began his ministry. In Matthew's gospel, Joseph is depicted as a man of the right ancestry, morally upright and a devout Jew: a man who 'decreased' so that Jesus might 'increase'.

Firstly, Joseph is of the right ancestry. He comes from the line of David directly from Abraham. Matthew's genealogy in his first chapter may not contain your favourite or memorable bible verse, but stating that Joseph was descended from David assured Jewish listeners that Jesus might also be from David. Family trees are still of fascination and of importance to many – witness the queues in Chester market to buy a heraldic symbol of a family name and the popularity of television programmes such as 'Who do you think you are?' where celebrities research into their ancestral past to discover sometimes salubrious and sometimes prestigious ancestry. Matthew's gospel lists 42 fathers and 4 Old Testament women to show the ancestry of Jesus. One of the women is Bathsheba, the woman who became pregnant to David whilst she was already married to Uriah, so we are given a quiet hint that we might later be hearing of another pregnant girl who is in trouble. The penultimate man in the genealogy is Joseph. He, unlike the others, is not described as a 'son of someone' but rather as the 'husband of' – the husband of Mary. As with many men and women today, Joseph's status comes, not from his parentage but from whom he marries. The family of this man Joseph, the son of Jacob, has lived in Bethlehem, the very place that David was born and the place that Jesus, too will be born. Matthew has carefully led us to the understanding that this man Joseph has the right ancestry to be associated with Jesus. Although, in Matthew, he is not considered to be the physical father of Jesus, he is certainly worthy of being an earthly father to Emmanuel – 'God with us'.

So Joseph is of the right ancestry and secondly, he is morally upright and a man of honour. A marriage in those days would have been agreed by the parents and then taken place immediately after puberty. The girl would have continued to live with her family until her husband could support her.

On discovering Mary's pregnancy, Joseph could have demanded a public trial. Matthew portrays Joseph as not wanting to expose Mary to public disgrace but rather to divorce her quietly. Pregnancy outside marriage can often cause friction, discord and relationship breakdown but it seems that Joseph, however distressing he found it, was sensitively going to choose the quiet option. Only the dream from God assuring him of Mary's faithfulness prevented him from making any public accusation.

Thirdly, Joseph was a devout Jew who listened to God. Joseph listens and responds positively to the angel who appears to him in the dream. The angel reinforces his ancestry by addressing him as 'Son of David' and tells the obedient Joseph that the baby is to be called 'Jesus' meaning Saviour. So Joseph becomes the legal parent: a parent who 'must learn to decrease in order that his son might increase.'

Joseph: a man of the right ancestry, a moral upright man and a devout Jew who listens to God.

What can we learn from such a man? Like Joseph, we too are of the right ancestry because we are all children of God. How might the world be different if we, like Joseph, were morally upright and listened to God? If humanity were morally upright maybe there would be no refugees or scenes that we have seen on our televisions of families leaving Aleppo last week. If we were all morally upright maybe we would share resources across the world so that there were few people dying of starvation, if we were all morally upright, maybe there would be no physical or sexual abuse. How would the world be different if, like Joseph, we all listened to God? Someone in the cathedral once said to me that they didn't understand how you *could* listen to God – they had never heard God speak to them. To hear God we need to listen both internally and externally. God can speak in a variety of ways: through dreams, through prayer, through silence to mention only a few. If we all followed the example of Joseph of listening to God then we would become aligned with God's will and the kingdom of God would begin to appear.

The climax to the reading today is not about Joseph but about the incarnation - the beginning of God's love breaking into this world. Joseph from the very beginning was, like John the Baptist, a man who 'decreased so that Jesus might increase'

As we prepare to welcome the Christ child, we pray that as children of God, we, like Joseph, might always strive to be morally upright, might be ready to listen and respond to God obediently and that we might have the humility to 'decrease in order that others in Christ might increase'.

Canon Jane Brooke