

Followers of the Way

Sermon: 19 December 2021

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Be still and know that I am God

Matthew 1: 18-25

A couple of weeks ago we had as our reading Luke 1: 26 - 38, when the angel appeared to Mary and announced that she was going to conceive and bear a child, the Son of the Most High ... whose kingdom would never end. But our reading today tells the same story from a different perspective. Matthew is known as the most Jewish of the gospels, and at first glance it's maybe tempting to think he ignores Mary because he thinks women are inferior. But in this, we would be wrong. In Judaism, right from the beginning, there were very powerful and prominent women, such as Deborah and Esther - and no one reading the description of the wife, at the end of Proverbs, can imagine that this lady was a junior partner in the relationship or in any way inferior. Similarly, in the genealogy that starts this gospel and traces Jesus' descent back to Abraham, unequivocally presenting Jesus as the fulfilment of biblical prophecy and the law - Matthew includes four named women. Luke doesn't include any, but every one of these ladies is key, and, by including them, Matthew is telling us something very important.

So no, Matthew is not prejudiced against women. But, that said, in first century Palestine men were very clearly regarded as the head of the family. Compare, for example, Paul's admonition in Ephesians 5, 'Wives submit to your husbands, as you submit to the Lord' and 'Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loves the church...'. And in now focusing the narrative on Joseph, and his reaction to Mary's pregnancy, Matthew is saying something very important.

I think we need to backtrack a little here, because something that often puzzles people about the birth stories is, what does the text actually mean when it says that Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph? Does it mean they were engaged, or what? And if they were only betrothed, why would he have to divorce her?

Well, in first century Palestine, the process of marriage was rather different from the way we understand it today. Engagement often took place when the prospective bride and groom were quite young, and it would be arranged by their families. At this point it could be terminated without too much problem. But some time later, the arrangement would become officially recognised as binding by the couple's **betrothal**, and from this point on the pair would be known as husband and wife and the arrangement could only be broken or ended by divorce. So this was a kind of interim period before the wedding, and it usually lasted about a year, but during that time, though the couple were formally pledged to each other, they didn't live together and they certainly wouldn't have had sexual relations. So this was the phase Mary and Joseph were in. They were legally

betrothed and their relationship had binding force that could only be ended by divorce, but they were still waiting for the wedding.

So, back to Joseph. In many ways it's all too easy to overlook Joseph, because he seems a bit peripheral, pretty much unimportant. He was a carpenter, end of story! Wrong. From the angel's announcement in Luke, we know that Mary was specially chosen by God to be the earthly mother of His Son. And we know how costly that would have been for her, but she never for a moment wavered. God chose well. Yet in Matthew's focus on Joseph, we begin to understand that that's only part of the story, and just as much as Mary is chosen, so is he. For better or worse, though they're still waiting for the wedding, Joseph is united with Mary and is therefore the head of the family. And while God's reassuring him that it's okay to go ahead with the wedding, it's that that He's telling Joseph - you're the head of this family, and you've got to take responsibility.

If Mary was chosen to conceive and bear the child, then Joseph, equally, was chosen to take care of her and the baby.

This is actually mega. Joseph, though he doesn't know it, is being called to look after , and father, the saviour of the world. We often wonder, what would have happened if Mary had said to the angel, 'Whoa, hang on a minute, let's think about this ...'. But what would have happened if Joseph had refused? In focusing on Joseph, Matthew is making it clear that this is a call to both of them, and that both are absolutely vital. Mary, to carry and give birth to the child. But Joseph to protect and care for them.

Can you imagine what Joseph would have felt, however, when he found out that the woman to whom he was pledged was pregnant? V.19 says that Joseph was a righteous man and didn't want to expose Mary to public disgrace, but at the very least he must have felt betrayed. Think about it, the woman he was pledged to spend his life with – Mary, butter wouldn't melt in her mouth – had had sex with another man! And as for all this stuff about being visited by an angel! Well, ten out of ten for originality ... but did she really think he was such a fool?

Was Joseph hurt? I would guess so. I imagine, before it became obvious Mary was pregnant, that he'd have thought his life was all mapped out. It was going to be the two of them against the world! And maybe he really did love her - after all, that wouldn't be an unreasonable assumption for a young couple about to get married. In which case, he'd surely have felt anguish.

What do you do when you get hurt like that? Well, if you watch any of the TV soaps, I think the accepted mode of behaviour is to get drunk and lash out at everyone round about, causing complete chaos. But it would seem Joseph was a bit more temperate. He took the decision that the wedding was off. But he was a good man, Matthew tells us, so instead of exposing Mary to public humiliation and disgrace – which maybe, in his darker moments, he thought she deserved – instead of doing that, he decided to divorce her quietly. And I would guess he was hoping that after that, in time, he could pick up the pieces of his shattered life and get on with things.

But however bland the description Matthew gives, that kind of betrayal can't have been easy. How many sleepless nights did Joseph spend, I wonder, raging about the injustice

of it all? I wonder if he shouted at God, how could you let this happen? I thought I could trust her! It's what's left unsaid here, I think, that's really telling ... Joseph considered the situation, and decided divorce was the only option. And at this point, at last, God speaks to him. V.20, Joseph dreams he's visited by an angel, who tells him, '... don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit ... the child will save his people from their sins.'

And it would seem that from that moment, everything changes. Joseph knows he's had a direct encounter with God, and all his fears, doubts, rage... his bitterness maybe ... are laid to rest. We read that when he wakes up, he does exactly what the angel has told him to. He goes ahead with the wedding and takes Mary home as his wife, but doesn't have any union with her until after she gives birth.

Matthew is not just affirming the fact that family is important to God, but affirming God's love for Joseph, and the vital importance of his role. God loves Mary and Joseph equally, and they're both called. Equally. Joseph's role is absolutely key.

But I think there's another lesson for us here. It's all too easy, when something bad happens, to get plunged into turmoil – to run around in fact like a headless chicken. Or we can simply get so busy that we become over-stretched and stressed. Either way, it's all too easy for God's voice to get crowded out, so that we no longer hear. And after that it can be just a short step for us to think He's not really there, or that He doesn't care.

The most important thing for all us in life is our relationship with God. A relationship that God actually wants. When things seem difficult, or frightening, we need to stop and listen, and come in under the shadow of God's wing – so that we can hear what He's saying to us. God has promised that He will never leave or forsake us, and that He will show us the way. Isaiah 30:21 reads "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." And in John 14:27 Jesus says, 'My peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you ... Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.'

God's power and guidance are promised to us, and He reaches out to us in love. So this Christmastime, whatever happens in the world or closer to home, rest in that love. Whatever the news, or the stresses we face, God says, 'Be still and know that I am God'. And it's in that stillness that we find meaning, healing, peace, renewal... But we can't hear if we don't take time to listen.

Joseph found understanding and strength when he listened – when he heard what the angel had to say. Joseph still faced difficulties, of course, but it was actually because of those difficulties that he was called. He could obey because he listened. Let us never forget Joseph, and the vital part he played. And let's listen to what God has to say to us, that we too might play our part.