

Sunday 18th December

Isaiah 7:10-16

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-end

On three or four afternoons during the Journey to the Stable a couple of weeks back I played the part of Joseph in the Christmas story play. Joseph only has a two or three lines in our version of the play – even I was almost able to remember them without using the crib sheets that I had placed in the manger!

But I challenge you to find any actual words spoken by Joseph recorded in the Bible. If it were a radio play or an episode in the Archers, Joseph would be one of those ‘unheard of Ambridge’ characters like Freda Fry – someone referred to but never actually heard. Much loved, I guess, by BBC accountants!

Our Christmas stories, dramas and songs tend to focus on the other characters - There’s the Magi, exotic and somehow still pristine in their silks after their long, dusty journey from somewhere in the East as they present their gifts to the new born Jesus; there’s Gabriel, winged, magnificent, both frightening and gentle, chosen to make an offer that might be refused but one that we know won’t be; there’s Simeon and Anna in the Temple satisfied, almost overwhelmed by seeing this tiny child – not yet a hope fulfilled, just a hope assured; and, of course, there’s Mary, young, vulnerable but open to God’s plan and singing out words that will last forever. Words that we will finish today’s service with. Tell out My soul the greatness of the Lord!

We even invent characters who are not even referred to in scripture – like the mythical innkeeper and even animals – the ox, the donkey and the sheep. To say nothing of some the stranger characters that appear in modern school nativities.

But Joseph. He hardly gets a mention.

Joe. Honest, solid Joe.

Joseph - The carpenter. The man in the background. Almost always depicted as much older than Mary – but again there’s nothing in the Bible that says that. Old enough to be her father – the protector rather than the lover of a young bride. There’s Joe leading the mythical donkey along the road; there’s Joe being turned away by the mythical innkeeper; there’s Joe watching the Wise Men offer their gifts.

There's Joe, quietly standing alongside Mary in the Temple as they meet Simeon and Anna. But they speak no words to him, only to Mary.

No prophetic songs soar from Joseph's heart, only from Mary's. In fact, as we have said the Bible records not a single word of his, and he slips out of the story without even a sentence to mark his passing.

He's a craftsman, a working man, and ordinary guy. We should remember that God did not entrust his son to be fathered by a rabbi or a scribe or a Pharisee or a rich merchant or a prince - but by Joe. A man who put God's agenda for his betrothed before his own hopes. A man who left his home and his business for the sake of the girl he loved and the God he loved, served and obeyed. A man who set aside the sexual expression of his love for Mary until after Jesus' birth, just as his son would set aside the joys of marriage and sexual love. A man who risked Herod's murderous intent and was ready to lay down his life for his bride, just as his son would be ready to lay down his life for his bride – the church. Quietly strong, dependable and faithful.

Maybe Jesus learned a thing or two from honest, solid Joe.

In an era where we like our heroes articulate, powerful and sparkling, Joe offers a different model. The Bible uses a telling word to describe him – he was a good man, or a righteous man as today's translation says. Would that be epitaph enough for us? Good, righteous, Good old Joe.

But maybe because Joseph – good honest Joe – was such an ordinary character we – as ordinary people can learn things from him.

No doubt he had plans for his future. We have often pondered on Mary's future, and how the Angel's message changed everything for her. But what about Joseph? His future - A job, children - sons, a continuation of the family line.

And then this. His betrothed Mary is expecting. And he knows it's not his. Perhaps they had had difficult conversations – we just don't know. But I can guess he was wondering whether he should have her publicly disgraced as the law says or ... what ... what other option was there??

Our good old solid and dependable Joe is caught between a rock and a hard place or rather between the law and the soft place that he has in his heart for Mary. Eventually he decides to divorce her quietly. He cares enough for Mary to spare her the disgrace; yet he doesn't feel he can go ahead with the marriage. There are too

many questions unanswered. He wrestles with his conscience; he struggles to see a way forward.

Mary saw the angel Gabriel face to face; John the Baptist's father Zechariah saw the angel Gabriel face to face; even the shepherds in the fields saw angels face to face but for Joseph it was in a dream. A vision of an angel as opposed to the real thing. But that was enough for good honest Joe.

The angel tells him he shouldn't be afraid, but he should take Mary to be his wife. The child she is carrying is from God. He will be called Jesus. As the name suggests, he will save people from their sins.

This was the nudge Joseph needed. There was no questioning; no argument; no "that's all very well, but". Joseph did as he was told, or as the Bible recalls it, was commanded.

But it was not an easy path to take. There would have been words, mutterings, glances from neighbours and friends. You can't hide a pregnancy. But good, honest, dependable, faithful Joe knew this was the only way.

For those of us who find charismatic, up-front, confident heroes somewhat off-putting, here we have a very different role model for us to follow, a very ordinary hero.

Joseph. God, honest, dependable, down-to-earth, obedient, faithful Joe.

So we finish with the Collect – the Church's special prayer for Joseph.

God our Father,
who from the family of your servant David
raised up Joseph the carpenter
to be the guardian of your incarnate Son
and husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary:
give us grace to follow him
in faithful obedience to your commands;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.