

St Botolph's Church Worthing

18th December 2016

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Matthew 1: 18-25

We have been trying hard all through Advent to concentrate on it being a time to look forward to Jesus coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead – but our Gospel Readings have rather conspired against us. On the first Sunday in Advent we did have Jesus teaching about the need to be ready for him to come in judgment, but since then we have had two readings with John the Baptist as the central character, and then today we have Matthew's very simple account of the birth of Jesus and all that went before it.

We certainly can't avoid Jesus' first coming as a baby born in Bethlehem today but we don't want to anticipate our celebration of Christmas next Sunday. So let's have a look at events through the eyes of Joseph. It starts with the shock of discovering that Mary his betrothed is pregnant: and he knows that this is not his child. In his shame and anger he might very well have denounced Mary as an adulteress – and we know from the Gospel story of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery that she could have been stoned to death. But Joseph is a righteous man and he wants to put an end to this situation as quietly as possible. While he is considering how to do this, he has a dream that changes his and Mary's life: for God reveals to him what he is doing and he trusts Joseph to work with him in bringing about his plan for the salvation of mankind. This was a real wish on God's part, for he had given Joseph, like all his human creation, free will.

Joseph could have woken up and said 'what a stupid dream' and gone ahead with his plans. But he trusted God, even though it was probably going to make him the subject of snide jokes from his friends. He accepted the responsibility for bringing up God's Son and giving him both his name – Jesus – and a family line – the line of David. Both of these are important, for Jesus means 'God saves' and it was a statement of what God was going to do through him. Also many of the Old Testament prophecies said that God's Messiah – the Christ would come from the family of David. So important was this considered that the whole of Chapter 1 of Matthew's Gospel is the genealogy of Jesus, from Abraham through David to Joseph 'the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ'. To reinforce all this Matthew quotes Isaiah's prophecy of a virgin giving birth to a son, who will be Emmanuel, meaning God with us.

So here we are on the threshold of Christmas with a man - Joseph - who does not get enough credit in the Gospels for his bravery in what he did

for God. Are there ways in which we can follow his example, as we seek to grow in Christian faith and living. The first thing we can learn is to face difficult situations with thoughtfulness, rather than an immediate panicky reaction. Joseph 'considered' what he was going to do. He was also a kind man, who did not want to make someone else's life harder than it had to be. We are reminded here of three of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5, which should be in the lives of all Christians – self control and then gentleness and kindness. Joseph also trusted God's message to him in his dream. God speaks to us in various ways sometimes, but not often in dreams: more often through his word, the Bible: through the words of Christian brothers and sisters or by the Holy Spirit in the quietness of our times of prayer. We must first be open to hear when God is speaking to us, as Joseph was, and this is not as easy as it sounds. We often have our own agendas and we find it hard to listen to anything that does not fit with them, and having heard God we must obey him and do his will. Joseph married Mary, gave Jesus his name and brought him up.

Are there simpler things that God is asking of us this Christmas and which we are resisting? Let's open our ears, wills and hearts to God at this time. And as we consider this, let us also remember that this is till Advents and that, one day, Jesus will come again and will judge just how well we have treated our fellow men and women. He will be looking for self-control, gentleness and kindness as well as the other fruits of the Spirit. He will also judge just how well we have listened to god throughout our lives and obeyed him. Joseph will undoubtedly be with the wheat to be gathered into Christ's barn on the day of judgment. We want to be with him and not with the chaff being burned in unquenchable fire.

AMEN