

Matthew 1:18-25

18.12.16

Joseph's role

Just over a week ago we had our marvellous performance of Charles Dicken's 'A Christmas Carol' here in the church, and our passage this morning from Matthew's Gospel brings to mind another Dicken's story, *Little Dorrit*. When the film was made of this story it was actually two films, both very long. This was not *Little Dorrit 1* followed by *Little Dorrit 2* but rather the same story told from two different points of view. The first film told the story from the hero's perspective and the second from the heroine's. And in the Gospel story we get something similar. Read the account of Jesus' birth in Luke's Gospel and you get it told from Mary's perspective. Joseph barely gets a mention – only that he happens to be the man to whom Mary is engaged. It's all Mary. But then turn to Matthew's Gospel and the story is told from Joseph's point of view. In this narrative it is Joseph who receives visits from the angel of the Lord through whom he receives instructions from God. And so in the Gospel accounts there is a balance, a complementarity between Mary and Joseph whereby each play their part.

Which is why – while it is good to see a woman playing a key role in the Bible – I nevertheless think that Joseph has had rather a bad deal in Christian history. Mary, after all, has been elevated to a place of supreme importance. 'All generations shall call me blessed' she declares in her great song of celebration that she has been chosen by God to give birth to the Saviour, and we have certainly called her blessed, especially in the Roman Catholic Church where she is prayed to and often plays a role of mediator between us and God. But what of poor Joseph? It's as if he's been edited out. Think of all the Christmas Carols that extol, or at least mention, Mary. And then think how many celebrate Joseph. I did a quick count and reckon that there are 29 Christmas hymns in our hymn book, just under half of which – 14 – mention Mary. Joseph gets one reference, in *Silent Night*, which has the line 'Mary and Joseph in stable bare'. That's it! And when in the occasional carol he does get a mention, it's pretty downbeat. So in a piece called 'The Cherry Tree Carol' Joseph is walking in a cherry orchard with Mary who is heavily pregnant. She asks Joseph to pick a cherry from a tree for her, to which he responds sullenly, 'Let him pluck thee a cherry that brought thee now with

child.’ In other words, if you want a cherry, ask the guy who got you pregnant! And of course Joseph receives scant mention in the Gospel story, playing no further part – unlike Mary who surfaces during Jesus’ ministry and is present at Jesus’ execution.

Well, I wonder if one reason why Joseph is somewhat bracketed out of the story is that practically every time we encounter him he’s asleep – asleep and dreaming! Indeed it is quite possible that in his Gospel Matthew, who is always keen to link Jesus to the Old Testament and to the story of Israel, is making a connection between Joseph and his Old Testament namesake, he of the coat of many colours who ended up prime minister of Egypt. In that story Joseph was a dreamer, just like Matthew’s Joseph. But in order to dream you’ve got to be asleep and that seems to be Joseph’s natural state. In the nativity story God speaks to Joseph three times in a dream: firstly, in our passage, to reassure him that Mary has not been hanging out with other men; then twice more in the next chapter: once to warn Joseph to take Mary and their child to Egypt because King Herod is after them, and once to let them know that it’s safe to come home as Herod has died.

Is there not something wonderfully ironic about the fact that God must deal with Joseph when he is asleep? Joseph can be of use in the unfolding events – but only when he is completely out of it. After all, we are never more inactive than when we are asleep. We are never more passive. We are entirely unproductive when we are sleeping. Businesses and factories would close down if their employees spent their days asleep. Output would collapse. The Stock Market would implode if traders spent their days in slumber. We achieve nothing in our dreams. And that is the whole point about Joseph in the Christmas story.

You see, what God is doing here only God can do. God is intervening in the world, and God must intervene otherwise the world has no future and no hope. God here is mounting a great rescue operation, entering the world in Jesus Christ as Saviour, in order to deliver us. And that’s something we cannot do for ourselves.

Let me put it this way. In the patriarchal world into which Christ was born, a man’s world where a betrothed woman could be put to death for adultery or getting pregnant by another man, we could say that Joseph represents human power and initiative. In that context he, the male of the species, represents human capability. He represents the human capacity to do

great and marvellous things. We have such extraordinary technological power and ability after all. We can probe the mysteries of the universe; we can harness the energy of the electron; we can produce great art and great music and great architecture and literature. And certainly we can improve life and we can eradicate diseases as we have done and we can greatly lengthen the average span of a human life. Yet all the time we are reminded that we are in the grip of destructive forces that are simply too big for us, too strong for us.

So, who can feel anything but despair at the appalling pictures and reports coming out of Aleppo this week? And the terrible events there only divert attention from the tragedies in Yemen and in Nigeria. Why are we still doing this? Shouldn't we be doing better? Why is or Christmas celebration once again dampened by harrowing news of massacres and refugees and starvation, all the detritus of our inhumanity to one another? And many of us are anxious and fearful at the spectre of a resurgent right, here in the Netherlands as much as elsewhere, and a vicious kind of nationalism that offers simplistic and divisive solutions to our ills. Can't we do better than this? Or look around the planet and we see the terrible self-destruction that is at work in the elimination of countless species and the destruction of our habitat. And it's clear that politics will not save us and science and technology will not save us, and evolution will not save us. Only God can save us. But for God to do that we have to stand aside, like Joseph, for we only get in the way. For an operation of this scale we need to be anaesthetised, put to sleep. The story of Christ's birth by a virgin without any 'marital relations' as our passage puts it so delicately is not taken literally by many, but whatever else is meant by Joseph's redundancy in Jesus' conception, it tells us that here God is doing something new and decisive and there is really nothing we can do except keep out of it, be open to God's instructions and do what we're told. Some things we cannot achieve by our own ingenuity and can only be received as a gift. And salvation, redemption, is one of them.

Yet having said all that, Joseph is of course not entirely side-lined in this story. When he awakes from his dreams there are things he must do. How easy it would have been for him to simply disown Mary, wash his hands of the whole business – not necessarily invoke the supreme death penalty for adultery of stoning, but just dismiss Mary, putting her quietly away, disassociating himself from her. Evidently he considered that but even if he had Jesus would still have been born. This great mystery would still have happened. The plan of

salvation would still be launched. God is in control. But God does not want to do it apart from Joseph. God wants Joseph to be part of the story, to play a part in the drama. So I love verse 24 of our reading: ‘when Joseph awoke from sleep he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...’ The sleeper awakes! The dreamer comes to! And then he acts: he takes Mary as his wife, and later in the story he takes his wife and new-born son to Egypt. In other words he joined in what God was doing. He took responsibility and played his part. ‘When Joseph awoke from sleep...’ And the call to wake from sleep is one of the great themes of this season of Advent. We hear it in that marvellous advent hymn,

‘Wake, awake! For night is flying’,
 the watchmen on the heights are crying.
 ‘Awake, Jerusalem, at last!’

We hear it in a verse from Paul’s letter to the Romans in a passage often read in the Advent season, ‘you know what time it is, how it is now the moment to wake from sleep...’ This is God’s recruiting call. It’s the call to wake up to what God has done in coming among us Jesus Christ – and to get involved. It’s the call to recognise ‘Emmanuel’, that God is with us uniquely in this baby - and to respond. It’s the call to discipleship, the rallying cry to join in that liberation movement that resists the powers of death and destruction that assail the world and that tear our world apart. It is the summons to live with Christ as Lord, the Christ in whom the power of life is at work.

This, then, is Joseph’s story, Advent from Joseph’s perspective. And we recognise our helplessness and we get out of God’s way. But as God called Joseph by name, so he calls you and me. Awake to play your part in Christ’s coming into the world. Amen.