

Joseph the dreamer

You could say that Joseph is the great mystery man of the Gospel story, someone we know very little about. He gets a couple of passing mentions in Luke's account of Jesus' birth, and while he features more prominently in Matthew's account from which we read, after that he disappears. What happened to him? Some think he perhaps died when Jesus was young, but we just don't know – it's as if he has been edited out. Mary of course is remembered. 'From now on all generations will call me blessed', sang Mary about herself and in the Roman Catholic church she is especially blessed and honoured – we might say too much. And she reappears in the Gospel story and is present at the execution of Jesus, and earlier in the service we lit an advent candle and sang about her. And just think of all the Christmas Carols that extol, or at least mention, Mary. 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. But we don't sing about Joseph. In our hymn book he gets just 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!

One feature of Joseph, however, that we notice is that every time we encounter him he's asleep – asleep and dreaming! Like his namesake in the Old Testament, he of the coat of many colours who ended up prime minister of Egypt, Joseph is a dreamer. God speaks to him three times in a dream: firstly, in our passage, to reassure him that Mary has not been 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, and so Joseph must get out of the way.

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, 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. And once again this year our Christmas celebration will again be dampened by harrowing news of conflicts and displaced people and poverty and hunger, all the detritus of our inhumanity to one another. Or look around the planet at the terrible self-destruction that is at work in the elimination of countless species and the destruction of our habitat, and our pathetic inability to come to an agreement about concerted action at the recent UN Madrid climate change summit. And as Christians we believe that the chaos of the world is evidence of our estrangement from God, our alienation from our Creator

and that saving of the planet ultimately involves a renewing of our relationship with God, a healing of the breach between us and God, a return to the source and goal of everything. Until that is in place we are caught in forces too great for us to defeat. But such reconciliation with God can only come as a gift from God. We cannot make it happen. We cannot coerce or cajole or manoeuvre God. It is not in human power or ability. For this we have to stand aside, like Joseph and remain passive, for we only get in the way. 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, reconciliation with God 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, urgent actions that he must carry out. Joseph is not entirely written out of the story. God wants him to be part of it, 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. 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 our passage from Romans this morning: '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 is the strange blend of activity and passivity that is a feature of the Christian life. In salvation we are rendered passive and helpless and then made responsible and accountable. We must be put to sleep and then we must awaken to action. And that is being reflected in the life of this church this morning. For the past year or so a small group has been meeting here every Monday afternoon and knitting away, knitting angels – over 600 of them. And in a little while we are going out onto the Spui to sing carols and to give out these angels as gifts from the English Reformed Church – wishing people a happy Christmas and reminding them of the message of Christmas, that God loves them. This is mission! This is evangelism! This is bringing this church out from behind that wall and that has involved action: patient, dedicated work, knitting these beautiful little angels week after week. I love it that the work of the kingdom includes knitting angels!

But then we have also ordained new elders this morning. And what are elders for? Well, basically the elders are here to help the church flourish. The church is the community of those who have received: received reconciliation with God, received grace, received salvation. But now we are called to awake and to engage our energies and our gifts and our talents. And we help and encourage one another to do this but if this is to happen the church needs leadership. It needs wise and creative people who can help to mobilise the people of God, the Body of Christ. In befriending, in encouraging, in supporting, in caring elders help to make the church the living Body of Christ, alive and energised and active in our church's life and in the world.

So thank God, today, for Joseph, who reminds us where we must be passive, receiving with empty hands what only God can give: reconciliation and peace with God. But thank God that he was also a doer, a man who woke and took responsibility and acted and worked with God. Joseph is often forgotten, overlooked. I would be delighted if he were remembered, and celebrated and imitated here

in this church through our worship and our mission and our eldership – that we might be all that we can be to the glory of God. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
Advent God, coming to us in the bay at Bethlehem,
we praise and bless you, faithful one.
In this season we praise you for all your promises:
promises of a new heaven and a new earth,
promises of peace on earth,
promises of reconciliation where conflict rages,
promises of justice for the poor,
promises of creation flourishing instead of languishing –
and all because you will not forsake us
but have bound yourself to us in Jesus –
all because of Emmanuel, God with us.
O God your coming in Jesus throw our world into relief:
a world where death is at work,
a world where peace is beyond us,
a world where conflicts burn,
a world of inequality,
a world where nature is groaning from exploitation.
God, have mercy upon us and forgive us.
God, save us from our sin and folly.
God, Emmanuel, forever with us
and who will not be without us,
come this advent season in forgiveness and grace,
wake us up to live in the light of your promises.
We pray in the name of the one who has come,
Jesus Christ our Lord,
in whose words we pray together, saying...