

December 19th 2010

What would you like people to say about you when you are not in the room? Upright? Moral? Obedient to God? Someone who listens to God? Someone who understands how to help others become important? Such a man was Joseph the husband of Mary. It's the fourth Sunday in Advent – only 6 days until Christmas! Every Sunday for the last three weeks, we have lit a candle in turn for the patriarchs, the prophets, John the Baptist and today the Sunday before Christmas, we remember Mary. If you expected to hear then about Mary in today's gospel, you will have been surprised that it was more concerned with Joseph. There is no candle lit for Joseph in the Advent wreath because, important as he was, he was a lesser cog in a much larger wheel – Joseph plays a small part in the greater story of Jesus's life.

Joseph is a man about whom we hear little in the Gospels. He is mentioned in the genealogy, when his dream from God tells him to flee to Egypt with the family and then when Jesus as a young boy is lost in the temple. He does not, however, appear at the wedding of Cana, nor at the last supper nor at Jesus' death: some have speculated that he had died before Jesus' ministry began. It seems that his moment to be noticed is at the beginning of Jesus' life – the birth. From Matthew's Gospel we can judge that Joseph was a man who was of the right ancestry, morally upright, a devout Jew who listened and responded to God and a man who was able to take second place in order that we might know Emmanuel, 'God with us' (as some translations put it).

Firstly then, Joseph is of the right ancestry who comes from the line of David from Abraham. Matthew knows how important the ancestry of Jesus is to his Jewish listeners and so he offers a genealogy in the first chapter – a genealogy which is often overlooked in lectionary readings since it doesn't hold the interest in quite the same way as other biblical passages. Many people like to know about their family tree – where they have come from. It is often the case that newly retired people like to research their family tree in great detail. The media has exploited such interest with programmes such as 'Who do you think you are?' where

celebrities research into their ancestral past to discover sometimes salubrious and sometimes prestigious ancestry. Matthew makes it clear that Joseph is a descendant of David. He lists 42 fathers and 4 Old Testament women – one of whom is Bathsheba who became pregnant to David whilst she was already married to Uriah, so there is a quiet hint that we might be hearing of another pregnant girl who is in trouble. We meet 14 year old Mary through Joseph – the penultimate man in the genealogy – a man who is not described as all the others are as a ‘son of someone’ but rather as the ‘husband of’ – the husband of Mary. As with many men and women today, Joseph’s status comes, not from his parentage but from whom he marries: maybe husbands of famous women who are introduced as, ‘This is John, he’s the husband of so and so,’ will understand his position. What is made specific in Joseph is made universal through the risen Jesus. The promise of Abraham that he will be a father of many nations is made possible through the ministry of baptism, in the words of Matthew’s risen Jesus, ‘Go and make disciples of **all nations**, baptising them.’ The family of Joseph, the son of Jacob, has lived in Bethlehem, the very place that David was born and the place that Jesus too will be born. The baby will thereby be the ‘son of David’ – ‘son of David’ - a phrase used more in Matthew’s Gospel than in any other. Matthew has carefully lead us to the understanding that this man Joseph has the right ancestry to be associated with Jesus and although, in Matthew, he is not considered to be the physical father of Jesus, he is worthy of being an earthly father to Emmanuel – ‘God with us’.

Secondly, Joseph is morally upright and a man of honour. A marriage in those days would have been agreed by the parents to take place immediately after puberty; the girl would continue to live with her family until her husband could support her. On discovering Mary’s pregnancy, Joseph could have demanded a trial. Matthew portrays him as not wanting to expose Mary to public disgrace. Joseph’s decision was to not to create a stir, but to divorce her quietly. Later Jesus, the saviour, will suffer public disgrace in the crucifixion but there will be no-one on that occasion, to rescue him from his humiliation. Pregnancy outside marriage can often cause friction, discord and relationship breakdown but it seems that Joseph was going to choose sensitively the quiet option, however distressing it was to him. His decision was altered after his dream from God.

Thirdly, Joseph was a devout Jew who listened to God in his dreams. Unlike Luke's gospel, it is Joseph, not Mary, who receives an annunciation from an angel. Interestingly, there are few works of art showing Joseph's annunciation but there are many showing the annunciation of Mary, such as the famous fresco by Fra Angelico in San Marco convent in Florence or the Russian icon in the lady chapel in this cathedral. Maybe artists find it easier to respond to Mary's assent to become the mother of the son of God rather than to the angelic dream of Joseph. Such angelic visitations would have been familiar to the Jewish listener since Abraham and Zechariah and others too had had revelations from angels. Matthew reinforces Joseph's ancestry in the words of the angel who addresses him as 'Son of David' and Joseph obeys the angel by taking Mary to his home as his wife. The angel tells Joseph that he is to name the child 'Jesus' which means Saviour, and thus, it seems, Joseph becomes the legal parent. Joseph's obedience to God is a small anticipation of Jesus' obedience which takes him to the cross: an obedience which we faithfully try to emulate today.

Fourthly, Joseph allowed Mary to assume more importance than himself. Joseph must have talked, loved and taught Jesus as an earthly father, but there is no evidence that he wanted to become a man in the public eye. He could, after all, (assuming he was alive), have told stories publicly and could claim to know Jesus well. Today, the media would have been on the doorstep asking for details about Jesus' childhood, his favourite clothes and his food likes or dislikes but Joseph does as God requires and then steps back. In the older marriage service (and in some newer ones), the father used to give away the bride – the father would step forward give her hand to the priest who then would give her hand to the future husband. The duty of the father then was symbolically finished – he had handed his daughter over to her future husband and was now not so important. Although the marriage service has changed to include more equality, the symbolism is similar in that Joseph plays his part in the upbringing of Jesus and then steps quietly back out of the limelight so that the world may see, not Joseph, but Emmanuel, 'God with us'. At the end of Mathews Gospel, the risen transformed Jesus speaks of this continued divine presence: 'I am with you always to the end of the age.'

Joseph then is a man we can learn from: morally upright, a devout Jew who listened and responded to God and a man who was able to take second place in order that we might know Emmanuel, 'God with us' today.

What of us? How morally upright are we? Suppose Wikileaks found out every detail about our past lives and leaked it to the world. What would we be most ashamed about? Is our behaviour at home and outside the home worthy of God? Are our thoughts and words always worthy of God? How does our behaviour show that we love and obey God, as Joseph did? Some years ago a boy of 11 called Garvan, was terminally ill in a hospice. He spoke of his love for God, his pleasure at the anticipation that shortly he would be with God forever and of wanting very much to do things to help or make people happy while he was alive. So, in spite of his disability and difficulty in hand co-ordination, he drew many pictures very laboriously, of Snoopy, his favourite character, as he said, 'to cheer other people up'. A small action: a child who, in spite of his own pain and proximity to death saw others needs as coming first and was able to obey and act to serve others for God. A reminder for us that as the baptised, we need to show God's love by focussing upon others rather than ourselves.

Joseph was a man to admire but the climax to the passage lies in the words which echo from Isaiah 'they shall call him Emmanuel, which means, 'God with us'.

Through the crucifixion and the resurrection Emmanuel, 'God with us', is mysteriously present here, today in the bread and wine. We have all been baptised into one family and we receive the body and blood of Christ today with humility, with reverence and with the hope that we, like Joseph, might always act justly for God, might readily listen and eagerly obey God.

