

Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall

St Paul's Canterbury

Advent 4A

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Joseph - witness to the with-ness of God

Joseph reminds me of all those people in the background who ensure things happen, often very quietly without fuss.

They are often people who are not noticed or rewarded as they are rarely in the spotlight.

Yet what they do matters.

We barely catch a glimpse of Joseph in the scriptures.

Most of the time we focus on the birth story as told in Luke and focus on Mary's yes to God's call.

Matthew's gospel focusses on Joseph, the righteous man who makes choices of his own, who acts out his own yes to God.

At the beginning of this passage we see the problem.

Joseph and Mary are engaged and she is found to be with child.

As a Jew he was within his rights to divorce her and to publicly shame her.

This was a very serious business in those days.

So his first plan as a righteous man, is to dismiss her quietly.

He knows the law, what he is entitled to do, yet chooses to be merciful. So being righteous is not just about judgement but is about mercy and seeing Mary as a human being.

This is a difficult decision yet it is in the midst of this situation that God comes to him.

It is at this very point that the unexpected happens and an angel appears to him in a dream.

Dreams are a common way that God communicates to people in the scriptures. Through them in unexpected ways, God acts.

Joseph hears and responds to the words that are said to him.

Faced with an unexpected choice Joseph gives his yes to God coming in human form, trusting in the God who is with us.

So he did as commanded and names the child *Yeshua*, Jesus, the one who helps, sealing his relationship with him. He trusts and accepts responsibility for this unexpected movement through the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps Joseph remembered the sign given to Ahaz, where Isaiah could see a new day of peace and security for God's people.

Perhaps he remembered as Matthew did that the sign of God's presence is the birth of a child – God with us.

As we draw close to the end of Advent Joseph reminds us of the unexpected ways God comes into our lives, and the courage and faith that we can discover when we are open to this.

Joseph was already open to being merciful and perhaps it was this that enabled him to see what God was doing and accepting it.

He faces the challenge that is before him and accepts it.

He trusts in the love of God being with us, trusting in the dream that comes to him.

Perhaps he realised that not only was God with him in the dream, but that how he responded was part of how God is with us, with all of us.

He is able to trust the future into God's hands and to be part of bringing this dream into reality.

Changing human hearts and minds is never easy.

It is not just by facts presented or by commands but by hopes and dreams and visions and people being with you through it.

So it is with this story as God's goodness and grace is written in Joseph's heart.

Joseph's righteousness in the end is about relationship, about love and being able to trust in what God is doing.

It is not about being a stickler for the rules but about being whole hearted in trusting in the with-ness of God.

In many ways that word with is the most important word in the bible, as it says something about who God is and what love is – being with another.

Joseph's heart and mind are opened anew to the unexpected ways that God comes to be with us and for us who is with us always.

This season of Advent is also an invitation to be open anew to how God is with us and to trust in the one who keeps coming into our midst.

There is a beautiful poem that UA Fanthorpe writes about Joseph.

I am Joseph

I am Joseph, carpenter,
Of David's Kingly line,
I wanted an heir; discovered
My wife's son wasn't mine.

I am an obstinate lover,
Loved Mary for better or worse.
Wouldn't stop loving when I found
Someone else came first.

Mine was the likeness I hoped for
When the first-born man-child came.
But nothing of him was me. I couldn't
Even choose his name.

I am Joseph, who wanted
To teach my own boy how to live.
My lesson for my foster son:
Endure. Love. Give.

Lectio:
Isaiah 7.10-16
Psalm 80.1-7
Matthew 1.18-25