

Reconsidering Joseph - faithfulness & imagination

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 18 December 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Advent 4A

Isaiah 7:10–16; Matthew 1:18–25; Contemporary Reading:
Jan Richardson “*Blessed are you who bear the light*”

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

Matthew’s gospel account of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth focuses on the figure of Joseph. Like Luke’s which is centred on the person of Mary, it is an account that was written decades after the life and death of Jesus. The birth narratives are not factual histories but stories of meaning and mystery, told that we might understand the life and death of Jesus, and through his life, that we might understand the Divine – and our place within the divine.

Given that it is a birth story, Matthew’s account is rather strangely focused on a man, and not on the woman who would actually give birth.

So before reflecting on Joseph, (and particularly for those of you who weren’t here last week) a quick word about Mary and her problematic virginity and the popular, but probably heretical Christian belief, that Jesus had a human mother but no human father.

Matthew’s Jewish community used a 3rd century BC Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, called the Septuagint. The Septuagint mistranslated a key word in the passage we heard read from Isaiah chapter 7. *Almah* means young woman (so the NRSV version that we heard read translates it correctly). If Isaiah had really meant virgin, there was another word he could have used, *bethulah*.

The Greek word used in Matthew’s gospel, quoting the Septuagint, is *parthenos*. And there are now suggestions that even this Greek word does not mean virgin in the sense we understand it: that it actually referred to a woman who had not yet given birth to a child, not to lack of sexual experience. So we have got very tangled up in an interpretation which now so often blocks a deeper appreciation of the birth narratives.

Matthew’s birth story is interesting for other reasons too.

If you look at the passage in context you will discover it follows one of those apparently boring genealogical lists that appear in a number of places in the Bible. But a closer look at Matthew's genealogy of Jesus reveals some very interesting problems... and some particular details.

First there are women in the family tree. It is an overwhelmingly patrilineal family tree, a record of fathers and sons, so what are these four women, in addition to Mary, doing there? Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba - all Gentile women. Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute to seduce her father in law Judah who had denied her justice. Rahab was actually a prostitute, not just a Gentile but a Canaanite, who saved the people of Israel and then became great, great grandmother of King David.

Ruth was a Moabite. The Moabites were a polytheistic, pagan people whom Israelites were forbidden to marry. Through great loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi, she wound up in Bethlehem and in the arms of Boaz to whom she was definitely not married.

The fourth woman mentioned in the list is "*the wife of Uriah*", Bathsheba. This woman suffered sexual abuse and the murder of her husband by Israel's greatest king. And as a result she too became an ancestor of Jesus.

And then there was Mary, the only Jew in the list of women. But like the other four, she was also a woman on the edge. She became pregnant with Jesus before her marriage, and the child's father was not Joseph to whom she was betrothed.

All five of these women share something in common: women who despite the disgrace of their situations, spoke up and acted boldly. Despite their tainted reputations and the contempt of others, they were subjects of their own lives – and they are an important part of our story. And here they are part of the lineage of Jesus.

Here they are not hidden, to be whispered about behind their backs. They are part of the story of grace and redemption that Matthew will tell. A grace that includes outsiders alongside the most revered of ancestors.

The second thing to note about the genealogy of Jesus is that it ends with a puzzle. The first verse indicates that the following genealogy intends to show that Jesus Messiah is the son of David, yet when the report reaches Joseph, we do not read, "*and Joseph fathered Jesus.*" Instead we get the genealogically awkward, "*Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.*" If you accept the virgin birth as it is traditionally understood, there is no biological connection between Jesus and the House of David. Clearly though, there is a theological connection, and that is what matters to Matthew. And that connection happens because of the response of Joseph to the news that Mary, his betrothed, is pregnant.

His initial response, on discovering her apparent infidelity is "*to dismiss Mary quietly.*" Scholars differ on whether this was a kind or harsh response. But given that he could have publicly shamed her and put her at risk of being stoned, I think it was undoubtedly the kinder path.

We are told that Joseph was righteous. For Matthew's early Christians, the word "righteous" didn't mean hypocritical or judgmental, but faithful and good. Joseph obeys the law but not strictly. He almost seems to foreshadow the thinking of Jesus, who said: "*you have heard it said but I say to you*" in relation to the teaching of tradition. Joseph, at this early stage, illuminates the tension of the prevailing understanding of God's commandments and the new thing that God is doing in Jesus.

Commentator Alyce M. McKenzie observes that Joseph was no minor player in this drama. In order for the genealogy to make any sense, Joseph must accept Jesus as his son and give him a name – which seals their relationship. To accomplish this in the face of what appeared to be expected of Joseph (divorcing Mary quietly), God sends to him an angel, in a dream.

This dream turns Joseph's understanding of "the right thing to do" totally on its head. It transforms our understanding of righteousness from rigidity and legalism. It invites us to reconsider social expectations and conventions.

Joseph's response has to do with trusting intuition and imagination--being in right relationship with the dreams of God. Before Jesus' teaching about law and love, before Jesus was even born, Joseph is a beautiful example of faith not as belief in a list of propositions or adherence to a list of rules, but faith written on our hearts as we attune ourselves to the dream of God for ourselves and for our world.

God is calling Joseph in a dream and Joseph is open to a new interpretation and a new direction. In his sleeping state, he allows God to speak to the depths of his heart and propose a resolution to the dilemma that his human reason, in daylight hours, had not been able to discern.

Joseph is not a hapless add-on to the story, cuckolded by another man or by the Holy Spirit. His faithfulness and imagination are exemplary. His story invites us, on this last Sunday in Advent, to hear a call – to us - to take another path. One that is not marked by the signposts of judgement but by markers reminding us that compassion for the vulnerable is at the heart of God's intent for our world. Mary surely was vulnerable, and if she had lived to give birth to a child out of wedlock, that child's life would have been without protection.

So Joseph, following the dream of God, took the baby Jesus in his arms and named him, and claimed him, as his own.

As we get closer to Christmas Day, where do you encounter the call of God on your life? Where are the places where you hear the invitation to live outside social expectations and conventions? What boundaries will you cross? What risks will you take to allow the dream of God to come to expression in you?

Jesus came to save, we are told.

This doesn't have to involve belief in something supernatural. It is profoundly natural, part of the order of things, that the Divine encounters us, is present with us, accompanies us as we respond to the call. It may come in dreams or it may come in conversations with those we love or it may come as we reflect on all that needs saving in our broken world. But we are assured that our life has meaning, that our life has purpose – and that there is reason to hope.

As Mary and Joseph journeyed to the first Christmas, they did not know where God would take them; all they knew was that something wonderful had been promised and that they had been beckoned to follow. So this text calls us too, to rise and follow God's call, not knowing where the journey will take us, or the path that God has set before us.

With this call comes a promise: the promise of Emmanuel, God with us. This is the gift of Matthew's gospel: the promise made in the birth of Jesus and the promise made by Jesus at the end of life: that God will be with us until the end of the age. In this promise, we may trust.

May your Christmas be blessed with call and promise and trust, so that you too, may be bearers of the light.