

MATT 1.18-25: JOSEPH: A MODEL FATHER

[Chelmsford 2 December 2012]

I feel sorry for Joseph. In some ways he's the real hero of the Christmas story. He stood by his wife when most fair-minded men would have sent their wives packing. And yet, it's his wife who gets all the limelight.

You look at the Christmas cards you receive this year. If they are at all religious, then for the most part all the emphasis is on Mary - and the baby, of course. Joseph, if he features at all, stands in the background. And yet Joseph was a very necessary figure - not only to the Christmas story, but to the later development of the child Jesus. Thanks to the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit Joseph may not have been essential to the birth of Jesus - but, as we shall see, he was essential to the story of Jesus.

And yet in spite of his importance, we know so very little about him. The last time we hear of him is when Jesus was 12 years old. After that he never features in the Gospel accounts.

Why? Did Joseph die an early death? Is that the reason for Jesus not beginning his public ministry until he was 30? Perhaps he couldn't begin the life of an itinerant preacher until he had fulfilled his responsibilities to his mother and younger siblings.

Frankly all that is speculation. The one thing that is certain is that we know very little about Joseph.

Maybe there is a lesson for us all there. We don't have to be well-known for God to use us. Just look at Joseph. He never enjoyed the limelight and yet he had a significant role to play in the purposes of God.

Indeed, not only did Joseph have a significant role to play - he also provides a significant role-model to those of us who are husbands and fathers. In a variety of ways Joseph was a man to be reckoned with.

This morning's dedications provide an appropriate context for us to look at how Joseph provides a role-model to all of us who are fathers. My apologies to those of you who are not fathers - but hopefully the sermon will still be of interest.

I JOSEPH STOOD BY HIS WIFE

“Mary... found out that she was going to have a baby” (Matt 1.18)

Let me ask the married men present here a question: how would you react if your wife were to get pregnant without any thanks to you? With some difficulty, I guess!

Joseph must have found it even more difficult when Mary got pregnant.
For the fact is Mary should never have got pregnant, whether or not Joseph was the father.

To understand the situation properly we need to know something of first century Palestinian matrimonial procedures. These consisted of 2 steps:

1. a formal exchange of consent before witnesses
2. 12 months later the subsequent taking of the bride to the groom's family home.

The 1st step was as much part of the marriage as the 2nd step. From a legal stand point, the moment consent was given, that moment a marriage was entered upon.

The consent - sometimes called '*betrothal*' – was usually entered into when a girl was between 12 & 13, and gave the young man legal rights over the girl.
She was henceforth his wife and any infringement on his marital rights could be punished as adultery.

Were the husband to die in that year, she would be regarded as a widow.

It is therefore somewhat misleading for the GNB to state that "**Mary was engaged to Joseph**". In no way can we equate a 1C Palestinian '*betrothal*' with a 21st century British engagement.

There is another major difference: unlike 21stC Britain, where most engaged couples live together, in 1st century Palestine no betrothed couple was allowed to live together.
For the customary year of the betrothal, the wife continued to live with her parents in the family home. During that year sex between the betrothed couple was strictly taboo.

Hence the embarrassment when Mary became pregnant.

Not surprisingly, when Joseph learnt of her pregnancy, his first reaction was to divorce her. Matthew describes him as a "**man who always did what was right**" (1.19)
I.e.. he was a '*man of principle*' - from his perspective as an upright Jew he had no other moral choice than to end the marriage.

But, and this is important to note, he was not a hard-hearted man.

Matt also tells us: "**he did not want to disgrace Mary publicly; so he made plans to break the engagement privately**" (1.19).

He could have taken Mary to court and brought public charges of adultery against her. Instead he was willing to opt for a quiet '*divorce*' in the presence of two witnesses.

In wanting to divorce Mary, Joseph was not being peculiarly hard or difficult.

He was only doing what any other right-thinking Jewish man would have done.

His parents and his friends – indeed, Mary's parents and her friends - would not have expected him to take any other course.

But at this moment God intervened. "**While he was thinking about this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph...do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived. She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus - because he will save his people from their sins'.... So when Joseph woke up, he married Mary, as the angel of the Lord had told him to do. But he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to her son. And Joseph named him Jesus**" (vv, 20-22, 24,25).

Good old Joseph. In what must have been an extremely trying and emotionally-fraught situation, Joseph had the courage and strength of character to take the dream seriously. For God's sake he was willing to go against the stream.

Would that there were more men like Joseph today!

We live in a society where divorce is regarded as almost as natural as marriage.

Statistically, if you have three children, then you can reckon that at least one, if not two, of the three will end up being divorced.

How different the Christian view of marriage is. In God's sight marriage is for life.

It is "*for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part*".

This is not old-fashioned romanticism. This is God's plan for marriage.

In the words of Jesus: "**Nobody must separate what God has joined together**" (Matt 19.6).

True, there are occasions when marriages do end - when marriages irretrievably break down. Jesus too recognised that. But this is not to be the norm.

One of the problems today is that many people regard the marriage covenant as a contract which can be terminated the moment when one or other finds somebody else they love more. But that is a false view of marriage, as also a false view of love.

We need to listen to the words of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who in a wedding sermon once said: "*It is not your love that sustains marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love*".

It may sound unromantic - but marriage is not about romance. It is about commitment.

Thank God, many of us find within that commitment romance.

But we mustn't put the cart before the horse.

Husbands - be like Joseph. Be prepared to go against the stream and stand by your wives!

II JOSEPH PROVED A TRUE FATHER

Joseph may not have sired Jesus, but in every other respect he was a true father

For although we know almost nothing about the way Joseph brought up Jesus, there are plenty of pointers in the Gospel to the fact that Joseph was a true father to Jesus:

- Had Joseph not been a good father, then almost certainly Jesus would never have called God "*Father*": I find it significant that whereas in the OT God is only called Father 11x, in the Gospels Jesus is recorded as using the word 'Father' of God 170 times. What's more, Jesus called God '*abba*' Father - '*Father, dear Father*'.
- Had Joseph been a neglectful father, then Jesus could never have told his disciples to begin their prayers with the words: "**Our Father in heaven**"
- It was no doubt his own positive experience of having Joseph for a father that Jesus on one occasion said to a group of fathers: "**You know how to give good things to your children. How much, more, then, will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him**" (Matt 7.11)

The fact is that a man hasn't fulfilled his fatherly duties by causing his wife to become pregnant.

Nor has he fulfilled his fatherly duties by accepting the guidelines of the Child Support Agency and paying reasonable maintenance allowance to the mother of his child.

In preparing for this sermon I dipped into a learned collection of essays entitled: *The Importance of Fathers: A psychoanalytic re-evaluation*. There the author of the opening essay states: “*To be a father... is the most challenging and yet elusive task a man can undertake. There are all the practical tasks: the education, the stimulation that the young child needs, the protection from dangers, the provision of warmth and a home. But for the baby or child to develop, they need much more: the richness of a lively creative self-confident father who can enjoy them, respond sensitively, say no and mean it and encourage the child*”.

Elsewhere the book supplies statistics showing the importance of the presence of a father:

- Girls without a father in their life are two and a half times as likely to get pregnant and 53% more likely to commit suicide
- Boys without a father in their life are 63% more likely to run away and 37% more likely to abuse
- Compared to other children, children without father involvement are twice as likely to end up in jail and four times as likely to need help for emotional or behavioural problems.

What sort of homes are we fathers giving to our children?

Traditionally we have thought of mothers as making a home for children ("home-makers") - but fathers also have a key role.

Do we have time for our children - time to listen with both ears?

What kind of example do you set? Not only in how you relate to your child, but how you relate to your wife - how you relate to people in general.

What kind of a role model are we providing.

Indeed, what kind of picture of God will they have as a result of us?

Will it be for the better or the worse?

Our children's understanding of God is to a large extent down to us.

That surely is a sobering thought!

III JOSEPH GAVE JESUS A RELIGIOUS UPBRINGING

Joseph will have taken Jesus to 'church'.

Well, not to church as such, to synagogue certainly.

Jesus, Luke tells us (Lk 4.16), was in the habit of attending the synagogue – and almost certainly this habit came about as a result of Joseph's influence.

What's more he will have taken Jesus up to Jerusalem for the main religious festivals.

So in Lk 2.41 we read: “**Every year the parents of Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival**”.

But Joseph did more than taking Jesus to church.

He will have taught Jesus about God.

The rabbis laid it down that one of the most important duties of fathers was instructing their children in the Torah, i.e. the Jewish Law.

In our society we think of mother as playing major role in child's religious development - but in Jew society it was the father.

E.g. at the annual Passover meal, which in some ways is the equivalent of our Christmas dinner, the youngest child present asks: "*Why is this night different from all other nights? For on all the other nights we eat leavened and unleavened bread. On all other nights we eat any kind of herbs, but on this night only bitter herbs. On all other nights we eat meat roasted, stewed, or boiled, but on this night only roasted*".

The father replies: "*A wandering Aramean was my Father*", and beginning with Abraham told the story right down to deliverance of Passover.

Almost certainly Jesus will have asked Joseph this question - and Joseph will have replied. It is not far fetched to suggest that much of what Jesus first learnt about God came from Joseph.

So, those of you who are fathers, how do you match up to the example of Joseph?

When I was a child we had a record at home on which an American children's choir sang: "*Don't send your kids to Sunday School, get out of bed and take them. You wouldn't want to go by yourself, don't let them feel forsaken. Some boys are good boys, some boys are bad... it all depends on Dad*". A little simplistic – and yet it contains some truth.

Tonight we have Outrageous, a youth service for young people.

Martin is tackling the subject of teenage sex.

Those of you with teenage kids, are you going to make sure your child is there?

Let me challenge you to bring your teenager to Outrageous, and while they are listening to Martin, you can come and listen to me at Word Alive.

How concerned are you for the spiritual well-being of your children?

But taking the kids to church is not enough. Religious Education begins at home.

Let me remind you of the words of the *Shema* which I read earlier in the service: "**The Lord - and the Lord alone - is our God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart/soul/strength. Never forget these commands that I am giving you today. Teach them to your children. Repeat them when you are at home and when you are away, when you are resting and when you are working**" (Deut 6.4-7).

Yes, we are required to teach our children about God & his ways – do we?

- Do you read Bible stories to your children?
- If you have older children, do you talk about moral issues with them?
- What kind of Christmas presents will you be giving your children? Will any be specifically Christian books? Or what about a Christian DVD? If you are stuck for ideas, then let me read you an extract from email from Sue Parrotte: "*Max Lucado has written some lovely books some of which have been turned into short films. Veggie Tales DVD's are still popular. The Chronicles of Narnia – both books and films are also still popular. Bob Hartman has done some great books especially for reading aloud and 'The Storyteller Bible' (1995) is really good for teaching Bible stories to young children*".
- Or what about buying a youth Bible for your child? I have discovered that although as a church we give Bibles to our children at the age of eight, many of our teenagers no longer used the Bible they were given, because they regard it as a children's Bible. It isn't – but nonetheless, that is their perception. Well, what about buying them a Bible produced for teenagers – and perhaps giving them some Bible reading notes at the same time?

Many fathers concerned for their children's education - anxious for them to get into good schools and do well. But what about their spiritual education?

In summary: Joseph was in many ways a model father

- he stood by his wife
- he proved a true father
- he gave his son a religious education

He provides a challenges to all those of us who are husbands and fathers.

How do we match up to the challenge?