

THE QUIET MAN

Matthew 1: 18-25

When I sat down to spend time reflecting on the readings. I expected that the faithful obedience of Mary would be the central theme, but this was not to be; I was drawn to Joseph and I realised I had much to learn from him.

If you read what we know about him, it is intriguing; nothing he said is ever reported. He is the quiet man. It is his actions we see, and his behaviour is a lesson for us all.

So, what do we know about him? He comes across as a man of deep faith, integrity, and quiet courage. He is normally described as a carpenter, but the Greek word could mean a builder or craftsman. He lived in a smallish village of mixed Jewish and Greek families. Everybody would have known each other. Nothing happened that everybody did not know about.

Contrary to him being usually shown as old, we do not actually know how old he was. However he almost certainly already had a son, James, who would be Jesus older stepbrother, so we are thinking of a second marriage to Mary. Now in Jesus time getting married in Judaism was a three-step affair; First came engagement. This could be done by the two families even when both parties were children, but it could be later. Marriage was considered to be far too serious a step to be left to the dictates of passion and the human heart.

The next step was betrothal. This could be seen as the ratification by the couple of the previous arrangement made on their behalf. Before taking this step, however the arrangement could be broken by the woman if she was unwilling to go through with it. Yet, if taken, this step was absolutely binding. It normally lasted a year but was not fixed as such. The couple could get to know one another as people as sex was forbidden. During betrothal, the bride would prepare for the ceremony, while the groom was expected to prepare the home he would bring his wife into. Interestingly, if the husband dies at this point the wife was considered a widow. However, this was not like a modern western engagement; the only way to break this bond was a legal divorce.

The third stage was the marriage proper, and the occasion was the formal home-taking ceremony with the husband taking the new wife to her now home.

Now Joseph and Mary were in the betrothed stage of their relationship, and all seemed to be going well, then came the bombshell: Mary is pregnant. And not by him. I wonder how he found out.? Did she tell him or did her family tell him? I suspect the latter. Imagine the range of emotions he might have had — anger, frustration, disbelief, and loss. As a law-follower, he knows what is expected, what he had every right to do under the law, but it seems brutal and unforgiving. As a righteous man he seeks God, asking him what he should do. He knows the law, but he also knows his betrothed and her family. Publicly, he could have accused her. The consequences would have been severe and possibly fatal for her, but Joseph, heartbroken and confused, resolved to break things off quietly — to spare her public disgrace. That decision tells us a great deal about the sort of man he was.

Now, before we go further, Joseph's response brings a lesson for all of us. How many times have we been hurt by another person, and we might want to bring them to public disgrace; we want to see them humbled? And how often have we believed that this will make us feel better or look better to others?

It really raises the meaning of forgiveness between people doesn't it. Peter talked about this a couple for weeks ago, didn't he? The destructive effects of holding onto a grudge or hurt or pride. The person most hurt, as Peter explained, is the person holding the grudge. An ugly twist is added to our soul. Joseph did not respond in such a fashion; he forgave her and was concerned for her future, irrespective of her assumed behaviour. We need to reflect on how much damage we do to ourselves by refusing to let go; and to the future by rejecting the possibility of a restored relationship

What if we treat all with mercy? What if one of the reasons for the Jesus' coming was to show us that we are not better than others. But there is one who is better than all, and he came for all. He came to show us there is no "us" and "them." He came to show that all are included in the "us."

We move on now to the next act in this drama. After making his decision as what he is to do, Joseph goes to sleep feeling comfortable that he had decided on a caring and honourable course of action. Only to be stirred up by the Holy Spirit about his decision. Has that ever happened to you? You have decided on a sensible course of action only to have God make you uncomfortable and offer an alternative way forward? Which way did you go?

Anyway, Joseph has been so stirred, and so in obedience takes Mary to be his wife and Jesus as his son.

Remember we are speaking of a time before Pentecost, so Joseph would have had a more limited, Jewish, understanding of the way the Spirit works. We hear of her as wisdom, offering her wares in the marketplace in the book of Proverbs where she is the person who spoke God's truth to those who would listen. She is the one who taught the prophets what to say. She was the one who taught people what to do,

. The Spirit of God also had another role, she enabled people to recognise God's truth when they heard it. She stirred up people's conscience, she helped them heed and act on her words. It is still the same today.

To be tidy and fill out the picture of the Jewish understanding of the Spirit, they also saw her acting in the work of creation. It was the Spirit that carried out God's creative work. The Spirit is the mind of Christ in the world. Chaos is tamed and transformed, life is created, and the world sustained. This work of creation continues to the present day, creating that which is incomplete and re-creating, restoring that which is wounded. Like Joseph we all need to listen and respond to the Spirit of Christ in our lives.

Finally then, let's return to Joseph to finish his story.

He protects his family by fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod's rage. A refugee father, doing what he must to keep his wife and children safe.

When they return to Nazareth, Joseph teaches Jesus his trade, takes him to the Temple, raises him in the faith. We catch a final glimpse of him when he is searching when Jesus is lost and then found again in Jerusalem. But after that, Joseph disappears from the pages of Scripture.

And yet his legacy lingers. A man who did the right thing quietly. A man who listened, trusted, and acted. A man who played his part in God's great unfolding story.

Joseph reminds us that, whether you be young or old, male or female, you don't have to be loud to be strong. You don't have to be in the centre of attention to matter. Many of the people who shape the world for good do so without applause. They are faithful, steady, courageous in quiet ways. People like Joseph. And maybe people like us.

We may not be destined for greatness in the world's eyes. But in God's eyes, every act of faithfulness matters. Every risk taken in love. Every quiet choice for good. These things shape the kingdom.

Thank God for Joseph.

And thank God for the quiet, faithful people who change the world, one small act at a time. As we review our lives this Advent, pray that we will behave in such a fashion as to be included in their number.