



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church December 21, 2014

Matthew 1: 18-25

In this season of stories, we remember and re-enact all the aspects of the Scriptural accounts of the birth of Jesus, and we even sing about all that in the carols we share. The stable, Mary, the angels, the shepherds, the star and the Magi, however, there is one character who only receives a light touch. Joseph. He rates one line in Luke, merely the reason for getting Mary to Bethlehem for the birth, and even in the account from Matthew that we heard earlier, the bulk of the commentaries talk about the quote from Isaiah, or the real parentage of Jesus or what the Law says about women found pregnant when they are betrothed. But very little is said about Joseph – his feelings, his motives and what his behaviour can possibly tell us about the Gospel. We get a lot of words and spiritual advice from Mary's encounter with Gabriel; what about Joseph's encounter? Even allowing for Joseph being a minor player in the story, and seemingly no longer around when the Gospels were being compiled, there is still an un-answered question. Why did Mary get an angel, but Joseph only got a dream? This is more than an idle question of interest to Biblical scholars or Bible study; it adds into the complexity of the Christmas stories that points towards a God who tailors actions and revelations to different people and different situations. Grace is not a one size fits all proposition.

Initially I thought that the dream motif in Matthew's story was a subtle nod towards the Old Testament Joseph the dreamer and dream interpreter, but I think there is much more to it than that. Joseph, the son of Jacob has no mention in the genealogy of chapter 1 and it would actually be a distraction to the Jewish readers. Joseph's descendants were the tribes of the Northern kingdom, a bad memory when Matthew wants to talk about David and the true kingdom of Israel. I think there is much more happening here, something that links in with the little information that Matthew gives us about Joseph. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man – or rather a man who did what is right; what was expected of someone in his position and social status. Not a strict follower of the Law, but someone who saw Law and religion as a part of life. The only other mention of Joseph in the Gospels tells us that he was a carpenter; a simple, practical man. Could it be that this man was entirely unsuited to receiving a visit from an angel? Too practical and earthy to deal properly with such a religious experience? Or too focussed on the day, and the work and schedules of life to allow such a visit to interrupt him? Or too preoccupied with the scandal of a pregnant fiancée and his obligations to both the Law and to Mary? Only in

his sleep, when the business of the day was gone and the practical attitudes shut down, could god get through to the real Joseph.

This is all speculation of course, but it does add into the other stories of Christmas; they didn't all get a visit from a glorious angel. Mary had a visit from Gabriel, Zechariah was visited by an unnamed angel in the Temple, the shepherds saw an angel who glowed with the glory of God, and the Magi saw a star. And here, Joseph receives a message in a dream. Each got a different message in a different situation, each appropriate to who they were and what they were to do in their part of the story. At the dawn of the Gospel we have good news that is not a one size fits all message or revelation. Joseph had his part to play in the Incarnation – to be the earthly father and place Jesus in the line of David – but to take his place, he had to receive the revelation of the will of God in a way that he could understand and to which he could respond. For Joseph, this was a dream.

What does it take for God to get through to you? For some of us, all these stories of Christmas are just that, stories; give me Jesus the adult challenging the religious leaders and opening up scripture. For some of us all this celebration and singing is too much; give me a quiet space with an interesting commentary to contemplate. For some of us these old carols are too familiar and cheesy; give me some new music and new symbols to experience. Hear anew the stories of Christmas; the earthy, practical interactions of Roman authorities and the Jewish population, Mary sitting alone in thought, and the songs on Zechariah and Mary that talk of God's actions here and now in this world. We are all different, but the stories provide all sorts of ways into the truth of the Incarnation, even through a simple, minor character like Joseph.