



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

22 December 2019: Choral Eucharist

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:10–16, Romans 1:1–7, Matthew 1:18–end

The Revd Philippa White, Succentor, Assistant College Chaplain, and School Chaplain

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, our liturgy directs us to Mary and the part that she plays in the great cosmic drama of God with us, the salvation of the world. The prayers we have prayed as we have lit each candle on the Advent wreath have moved us at a gallop through the story of salvation history – the first candle is the patriarchs and matriarchs, the second the prophets, the third John the Baptist, and the fourth, today, Mary. The prayer Canon Foot prayed as Hamish lit today's candle reminds us that the light we have been waiting for throughout Advent dawns in Jesus, the child of Mary.

And yet our Gospel reading wasn't about Mary at all. Those of you who were at Matins heard St Luke's familiar story: in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a virgin whose name was Mary... But in our reading, instead, the angel goes to see someone else. The angel goes to see Joseph.

Unlike Luke, St Matthew tells us the story of Jesus's birth through the eyes of Joseph: Mary's husband. And this can seem rather strange. Our focus on Mary – chosen to be the God-bearer from before she was born – can make us think of Joseph as purely incidental. Mary was the one God wanted; she happened to be engaged to Joseph, who came along as part of the package. But God doesn't do packages. Joseph was also called; also chosen; also said yes. Joseph is not peripheral to the story – or to Jesus. God chose Joseph to be Jesus' adoptive father – to love and teach and nurture. As Jesus grew up, it was Joseph as well as Mary to whom he looked to learn what it meant to be a human being, inhabiting a body and a world and a context.

So what did Jesus learn from Joseph?

Even if you know nothing else about Joseph, you probably remember that he was a carpenter. Given that Jesus' public ministry – the teaching, preaching, calling and healing that makes up almost all the Gospels – didn't begin until he was about thirty, it's not too difficult to imagine that he spent the first fifteen years of adult life working in Joseph's

workshop. Maybe Joseph taught Jesus to saw and hammer, to design and chart, to understand geometry; to swear colourfully when he missed the nail and hit his thumb instead.

Maybe Joseph told stories from Jewish history recent and long ago. Maybe they talked about the Jewish law, their shared faith, their God. Maybe Jesus teased out his sense of calling and of identity – and maybe Joseph responded with his own story of calling.

That's the story we heard in today's Gospel – a story that tells us a good deal about who Joseph is, and directs us to the values Jesus learnt from him growing up.

Matthew introduces Joseph as a righteous man – a phrase from the Hebrew Bible, a person who is faithful to the Law, seeking to walk in God's light. Joseph is faithful to God, he knows the Torah and tries to live by it; he tries to discern God's will in the decisions he makes. Iconography and tradition often depict Mary as learning the Torah and teaching it to her son; but Joseph too knows his faith, his God and his Law. He is a righteous man. And Jesus, brought up by them both, learns the importance of righteousness – of Torah – of the traditions of Israel and the faith of the Jews.

And Matthew presents Joseph's righteousness as shown, above all, in compassion. His response to discovering that Mary, his betrothed, is pregnant – and knowing it isn't his – is not to insist on his rights. In Deuteronomy and Numbers, the Law gives instructions for what to do in this kind of situation – and it's punitive. But despite his pain, Joseph isn't vindictive or entitled. Perhaps he even hopes that, if he dismisses Mary quietly, she will be able to build a life with whoever it is that she loves more than him.

Later in Matthew's Gospel, the adult Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is. And he responds: first, to love God; second, to love your neighbour. Jesus says that, more important than the details of righteousness, is compassion – and in making that judgment, he's following Joseph's example, who valued compassion and mercy over punishment.

So, even before he knows what's actually going on, Joseph is trying to do the right thing. And, although he's on the wrong track, God honours his intention. God sends him specific guidance: an angel in a dream. A greeting that highlights that Joseph is within the house of Israel: a descendant of David, as the genealogy that comes just before this episode in Matthew has already told us; but a descendant of David in his actions and attitudes as well as his ancestry. A greeting that is compassionate and yet also a calling: do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife,

And then God leaves it up to Joseph.

And when he wakes up, he does what the angel has told him. It's easy to underestimate the quiet courage this demonstrates. He could have decided it was just a dream. He could have chosen to stick to the decision he'd made. And yet he doesn't. He believes and obeys.

What did Jesus learn from Joseph? That strength of character is not about doubling down on a decision in the face of new knowledge; it's having the courage and the humility to admit mistakes and change behaviour; to hear God's call; to stop, to repent, to believe and to obey.

And also, of course, to love. In art, iconography and tradition, it's Joseph whose love nourishes and nurtures his family, whose love shows itself in practical acts of care and service. Joseph is guided by love: holding the child Jesus while Mary reads Torah, in a lovely French illumination of the fifteenth century; or waiting, on a twelfth-century column in the cathedral in Autun, for the magi to go home so he can look after his family. Who loves unselfishly, with a love that values the beloved above all, that gives without limit for their flourishing. That's what characterises Jesus' ministry. That's what we see supremely in the Cross. But it's also what we see foreshadowed in Joseph's, as well as Mary's, yes to God's plan and wholehearted commitment to the child God gives them.

But I want to return to the carpenter's workshop; where Jesus, working with Joseph, learnt to work with his hands.

Jesus the Word of God, through whom the whole world sprang into being, doing hard, practical, manual work. Sawing and hammering and filing for days on end to make a single chest.

There he learnt over those years and at Joseph's side – what it meant to be human. The pain of hitting his thumb (and the relief of swearing at the hammer); the frustration of a tiny mistake that spoils the whole; the disappointment of a piece that doesn't turn out quite right; the sheer boredom of doing the same thing, over and over again; the satisfied exhaustion and the bliss of sitting down after a hard day's work; the delight in achieving a finished, beautiful piece of furniture.

All these things that go with being human: with being embodied, incarnate. What does Jesus' humanity mean to him? He learnt that with Joseph, in the carpenter's workshop.

When we celebrate Christmas, this is the incarnation we celebrate. That Jesus came to be entirely human. To get his hands filthy with sawdust, calloused with manual work, bruised by stray hammers – before they are pierced by nails. To be part of a family: living with and loving and learning from them. To be loved and taught by Mary, and by Joseph; and to

learn from Joseph's love and care what it is to be held and loved unconditionally, by someone who has knowingly chosen to love him. When Jesus calls God his father, he's using a metaphor from his own experience – and his experience is of Joseph. Joseph the loving, Joseph the nurturing, Joseph the faithful and the righteous.

So as we wait for these last few days, turning our focus to the beginning of the Christmas story, let's not forget Joseph. All that Jesus learnt from him. All that we can learn from him. Joseph the righteous; the compassionate; the human; the loving. Joseph the humble and courageous, secure enough to change his mind. Joseph who shows the incarnate Jesus what it is to be part of the world he had created. May his example inspire us too as we leave Advent behind.