

Second Sunday of Easter 7th April 2024 – Evensong - The Annunciation

Introduction

On the Eve of the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the focus of the readings is on her betrothed, Joseph of Nazareth. Like Mary, he was chosen and favoured by God. In Matthew's gospel, we read that he was a righteous man and, as was fitting, he was the first after Mary herself to hear the annunciation of the coming birth of the Messiah. Joseph knew that he was not Messiah's natural father but knew also the power of his position as a bridegroom in the Jewish society of 2,000 years ago. Loving God before all else, he used his power to raise up rather than reject Mary and took the child as a firstborn son.

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'Annunciation of the Promised Saviour'

by

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Psalms 123 & 131; Proverbs 8:1-21; Matthew 1:18-23

Introduction

In the gospel, we heard how God prepared relationships of love and faith between a man, a girl, and her unborn child. In St. Joseph of Nazareth, we see a righteous man, a merciful man according to the Jewish law of 2,000 years ago. He was betrothed to Mary and betrothal bound them to marriage. In effect, betrothal was marriage yet to be consummated and allowed for one or both members of a couple to be children. From her description specifically as a virgin, Mary was under-age according to our law and certainly very young.

Matthew 1:18-23

On hearing that his betrothed, his bride, was pregnant Joseph faced a difficult decision. He recognised the power of his position as the bridegroom, It would be his decision alone that would determine the lives of Mary and her unborn child.

Joseph had committed himself to Mary and she, through her father, to him. Her pregnancy could have been interpreted by others as evidence of adultery. Adultery was punishable by death: death by stoning. So was purity restored. The righteous valued purity. The righteous presented themselves before the Lord their God for examination and questioned their own personal purity - purity of life, of heart, mind, and body. A pure genealogy, too, was prized and so Matthew's gospel opens with one for the Messiah tracing Joseph's male forefathers back to Abraham. With a pure, a clean, heart not tainted by revenge at being to all appearances dishonoured, the merciful Joseph did not want the girl stoned to death. He discarded his first option. His second was better, he thought, and he resolved to divorce Mary quietly, discreetly, and not publicly, so that she would not be further humiliated.

Joseph slept on it, this resolution and in a dream, God told him not to be afraid of accepting Mary as his wife. He had already resolved that the full penalty of the law was too harsh. Now God told him to go beyond his value of purity and cleanliness in life, and the importance of known lineage to him, his family, his village, his nation. In his dream, God was telling him yet more personally to humble himself and put aside even legitimate self-interest and anxiety. Joseph was to believe in Mary and commit himself to her and her

child in complete faith that through their marriage, the will of God to save his people from their sins would be done. Joseph was the man God chose to do the work of fathering the Messiah.

We see then in Joseph a righteous, kindly man of wisdom and vision but also more: a man of faith and capable of steadfast love. God chose him to cherish Mary as a person as well as his wife. From their covenant relationship, Jesus, the word of God given for his people and for the world, would spread the good news of God's love as widely as the waters cover the sea.

What do you remember of your father's fathering of you? I remember him giving me a shoulder-ride when I was little; being with Dad in his shed. He taught me to use a hammer to bang a nail in straight, to use a hand-drill and a wood-plane, watching the wood-shavings curl (good for the rabbit-hutch). He took my brother and me swimming, played with us in the water teaching us to do back-flips, gave us opportunities to grow in healthy intellectual and physical ways. And perhaps most importantly, we not only knew that he loved us: he loved mum. Yet there was more and that was about being an example to my younger brother and me of how to live.

Joseph not only committed himself to Mary but also to her child and how the child would be known: Emmanuel, God with us. He had gone beyond his resolution, then, to take a third option open to him by the law. An option which explains his hesitation about accepting Mary. That option was to adopt Mary's first-born child as his own. There was a precedent in the Torah, our Old Testament. The sons of Aaron, the priest and brother of Moses, were Nadav and Avihu. However, they are referred to as "the descendants of Aaron and Moses". This was interpreted as Nadav and Avihu being considered as sons of Moses as well as of their natural father, Aaron. Why? "Because anyone who teaches another Jew Torah is considered as if he had borne him (Talmud)." Ever wondered how it was that John in his first letter called his readers little children. He was not infantilising them. He was their teacher. At the same time, this makes pertinent and poignant the inclusion of the reading from the Book of Proverbs on this Eve of the Annunciation.

Thus, Joseph was chosen by God to father, Jesus, God's son. He would teach Jesus the Torah, as well as fulfilling all other responsibilities, give him the love of a human father and a pure lineage so that he could be rightly called 'Son of David'. I don't doubt that all would agree that he, as well as Mary, did everything well!

Conclusion

From this story of faith, we may understand that in some of the situations we face, we may see God bringing us to choices that may change our understanding of what we consider the best thing to do, the wise choice. As it happened to Joseph. Like Joseph, we change something of who we are and the way we'll be known to ourselves and by others, in the future. Like Joseph of Nazareth, we can have faith in God our Father, who has faith in us.