

Advent 4 Yr A
Matthew 2.18-25

Joseph had a real dilemma. Mary, his betrothed, his wife in all but the physical enacting of their marriage, was 'found to be with child'. A pregnant wife, when the time was right for it, should have been a cause for rejoicing. But this pregnancy should, if the law was strictly applied, lead to Mary's death and of course, the child's and the death of the man involved. The book of Deuteronomy provided for the death by stoning of a woman of the sort Mary now seemed to be.

Either she had willingly brought dishonour on her family, including Joseph, or she unwillingly brought dishonour in being the victim. It made no difference. Mary's innocence was no defence. Honour mattered above all else.

This is a world in which living without honour was to have nothing; better to be dead than dishonoured. Such honour killings are not unknown even today. Google the words and 180,000 references immediately pop up. It's a horrifying number; as shocking as the estimated 5,000 honour based acts of violence against women globally each year.

What to do? Should Joseph take the blame and at worst, risk his life. That could mean dying early in life, without a son, a shameful prospect in those days. At best, if he could have thought that way it would mean trashing his good name. If Joseph can establish what happened *should* he demand the law take its fatal course? It is a real dilemma, and Joseph must have been angry and afraid. Either way he lost something precious – his wife or his honour. There was no painless option, no obvious release from the grip of fear. He was losing the future he thought was secure, and he might lose even more. Even if he lived, no good family would offer him their daughter now.

And Joseph is a good man, a just man, a righteous man, observant of the customs and rules that kept the social order. But he was thrown into confusion by this event. He must have asked God why; what wrong might he have done that this happened to him. Matthew tells us Joseph was very distressed, the word implies fuming. Joseph was so distressed by trying to work it out that he sought refuge in sleep. Good idea – that's when God eventually got Joseph's attention.

In sleep, in a dream, God comes to Joseph to release him from that fear. God comes to call him to live beyond the world and the ways he has known. Has it ever struck you how often angels say, 'Do not be afraid.' It is as though God's messengers only trouble themselves when the need is great enough; only when fear has awakened us enough from our usual half consciousness to listen to God, when the moment is ripe for the new step.

But first the fear that impeded the next step must be addressed. It cannot have been easy for Joseph (nor for Mary but just now she is not in our foreground) but he did as asked and did not cast Mary off, the child is born and Joseph raises him as his own, a son of the house and lineage of David.

I think that the practical reason behind Mary's visit to Elizabeth was to get her away from Nazareth before the gossip took hold. So, Mary – and I think Joseph with her, though at this stage it does not matter if we know or not, travel south to the little village of Ein Kerem where John the Baptist was born. Zechariah, a priest of the temple would have needed to live close by the city. These days, Ein Kerem is a suburb of Jerusalem, but the village well is still there. We visited it this year, the parish group that travelled to Israel. No doubt the suspicious pregnancies of the old woman and her young kinswoman were the talk of the village back then.

Joseph exemplifies courage and trust in the face of changed circumstances; in the face of life out of his control. He stayed open to the inner messages of God and did not let his questions, his assumptions or his fears prevent his response to God. He even trusted and obeyed God, when it seemed God was contradicting God's own self.

The expectations of people and the inflexible demands of custom and tradition did not win the day. Joseph listened attentively to God and trusted in the call to a new, unexpected direction. He named the child as asked, the sign of accepting the child as his. Joseph modelled these characteristics for the boy Jesus and shaped his spirituality just as surely as his mother Mary.

Joseph's initial rejection of his altered circumstances turned to grace as he welcomed into his life, his home, the small stranger whose coming he had not sought. Joseph's hospitality turned my thoughts to our refusal as a nation to welcome the strangers in our midst who do not seem to have obeyed the rules and are in desperate need. What if, after due process, swiftly dealt with, we turned dismay to welcome for those who seek refuge from violence in our country?

Joseph is called a just man and Matthew has in mind the kind of justice the prophets called for. Isaiah says of God's justice that it springs from God's compassion for the weak and vulnerable. That's the only justice that Joseph sought in the end as he took Mary into his home and heart.

Matthew will later tell us Jesus and his parents fled the violence of Herod; a homeless child, without papers or passport, a frail expendable foreigner, in exile in Egypt, Jesus lies down under the stars he created, and entrusts himself to sleep.

If grace had not trumped custom and the violent 'solution' to the unwelcome been rejected, God's purposes would have been thwarted at that time, in that place. Not thwarted for ever, but then, and there. Perhaps that is what we as a people are doing now - standing in the way of God's compassion for the most vulnerable. It makes me wonder.....

The Revd Canon Dr Colleen O'Reilly

