

Sermon: Matthew 1:18-25
Chester Lord – St Peter's, Brighton Beach – 22/12/2019

May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

An unmarried woman. An unplanned pregnancy. An implausible explanation. Perhaps I've already been watching too many dramatic TV series now that I am currently enjoying school holidays, but it's not difficult to speculate what others might have been thinking and even saying: "Did you hear the latest? Mary's pregnant! They aren't even married yet." Or perhaps: "I heard that Joseph isn't even the father! How could she do this, he is such a righteous and honest man?"

I am certain that Joseph heard the rumours and noticed the suspicious looks, if not in the town, then surely in his own head. Joseph knows this is a scandal. He knows there are questions of faithfulness at stake. The child in Mary's womb proves it. By the light of day, it all seems pretty clear. Joseph will awake the next morning and do what he has to do. He will discretely send Mary away. But what appears to be one reality in the glare of public scrutiny, however, becomes quite another in the silence, listening and waiting of the night.

It's true. This is a scandal. Yet it is not a scandal of infidelity or immorality. The real talking point is that God is with us. Many of us hold images of God being transcendent, distant, up there in the heavens somewhere. But then Mary became pregnant. This means that God is intimately present among us. God's Holy Spirit allows the womb of Mary to conceive of and bear life. One can trace the hand of God at work in her.

Of course Mary's pregnancy raises questions of faithfulness. But it is not the typical enquiries or accusations of infidelity or betrayal. Rather, this pregnancy is a statement of God's loyalty and commitment to His people. In this pregnancy God reaches out and renews the covenant as He chooses us to be His people. God's continuing promise to show up and live in the midst of our lives is fulfilled in Mary's pregnancy.

Mary's love child in this case is not a euphemism for illegitimate. Instead this child is the revelation of God's love for humanity. A love that can be seen, heard and felt. This embodied love of God will feed, nourish and sustain God's people.

Joseph's initial daytime resolve to quietly reject Mary has instead given way to a night of dreaming, introspection and inner-wrestling after being visited by an angel of God and the delivery of the message heard in our Gospel reading. Joseph's perception of Mary, her pregnancy and even of himself has been challenged and reassessed. He has started to observe this situation, this scandalous pregnancy, through the eyes of faith rather than via the stares of villagers. Mary's context and the angel's words now speak louder than the people's voices.

This could only occur because Joseph entrusted Himself to the voice of God in the night. In the space where angels appear, guide and speak God's word. The night of faith reveals a reality more profound than the daytime drama in which we often live. It is the place where God speaks the truth to us and allows us to see more than we often see for ourselves alone. It is the night of Emmanuel. Joseph experienced God with him. He found holiness revealed in plain sight amongst the gossip, the unsavoury looks, the uncertainty and doubt.

Therefore, Joseph awoke in the morning and now did what he felt compelled to do. He began emptying himself. He let go of fear. He let go of his doubts and questions. He let go of his own reputation and standing in the community. He let go of the law and potential consequences. And with each letting go Joseph emptied himself so that, by God's grace and mercy, he might become the man that would protect, nourish and provide security to Mary and her baby.

He would ultimately become the man that sheltered Mary and Jesus from King Herod's wrath and the slaughter of many innocents. He would be the man who safely delivered Mary and Jesus from peril. He would be the man that returned them to Nazareth when the time was right to do so.

Isn't that what sacred encounters do? They are the moment and place where life is created and sustained, nourished and developed. They offer wise insights, guidance and when required security and protection.

They are that deep interior place where God's life and breath meet and unite with ours to create something beautiful and precious.

The open trust that Joseph offered was as critical as the one that Mary herself offered. Even as God was acting in Mary's womb to create new life, a divine-human life, so God was acting in Joseph's life in order that he might effectively sustain them.

At one level this morning's Gospel reading is about Mary and Joseph, but on another level it is also about you and me. It is about us becoming more open and receptive, more available to divine encounter in this final week of Advent so that God might reach us in the quiet night of our very own lives too.

So Joseph, as he did with Mary and Jesus, guides us by his example towards Christmas, reminding us that before anything can be filled it must first be emptied and be made ready to receive. He encourages and invites us to enter the night of faith and begin emptying ourselves of all that keeps us closed and hinders us. We need to let go of all those things that make our hearts, minds and lives inaccessible. Things such as guilt, fear, anger and resentment. The doubts and niggles that suggest that we are not good enough. The questioning of God's presence, the isolation and loneliness. The loss and sorrow. Letting go creates space, openness and an opportunity for God to work in our lives.

In this letting go we will be re-created, the world will hear Good News, and once again we will discover Emmanuel, that God is with us.

So as we prepare for this Christmas, let us ponder and recall the words of the Christmas carol 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' ...:

*"How silently, silently the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive Him,
still the dear Christ enters in."*

- AMEN