

Joseph (Matthew 1.18-25)

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A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse ... the Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him (Isaiah 11.1-2).

As many of you know, Mary the mother of Jesus is an important figure for me. At a couple of critical junctures in my life, it's been her words in Luke's gospel that have spoken: 'Let it be unto me according to your Word' and 'For nothing will be impossible with God'. Several times, especially in this final week of Advent, I've preached on Mary – on the spiritual significance of her obedience, her virginity, her humility and daring. Yet in all the years of my devotion to Mary, I've just this week realised that I've hardly given Joseph a thought. For this rather embarrassing omission, I blame Luke – at least in the first instance!

In Luke's account of the incarnation, Mary is the central character and it's her family that's intimately involved in the unfolding. Mary is the one to whom the angel Gabriel appears and it's her cousin Elizabeth who has also recently and improbably conceived a child to be called John, whom Elizabeth's husband Zechariah recognises as the forerunner of the Messiah. During her pregnancy, Mary is said to stay with Elizabeth about three months, and while there she proclaims the meaning of it all in her Magnificat.

At Jesus' birth and afterwards, Joseph is present in Luke's story. As in Matthew, he's the reason the birth takes place in Bethlehem 'because he was descended from the house and family of David' (Luke 2.4). He's there too when the shepherds visit at the prompting of the angelic host (Luke 2.16). But it's Mary who is said to ponder their words in her heart. And so it goes. According to Luke, when as a couple they present their infant son at the Temple, it's Mary who is warned by Simeon that a sword will pierce her soul also, and at a later visit to the Temple, it's Mary who reproaches Jesus when he stays behind after the festival: 'Child, why have

you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety', to which Jesus is said to reply (in words that no doubt contribute to Joseph's erasure), 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's [capital 'F'] house?' (Luke 2.48-49). The words of the carol, 'Born in the night, Mary's child', just about sums it up from Luke's perspective.

Which is why it's a bit of a shock to realise that, in Matthew's account of Jesus' conception and birth, it's almost completely the other way around. The first seventeen verses of Matthew's gospel are comprised of a genealogy that traces Jesus' ancestry patrilineally – from Abraham the father of Israel, through David Israel's archetypal king, down to Joseph 'the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born'. On this account, Jesus' Messianic credentials come, in the first instance, through Joseph's family line, and thus it is to Joseph – not Mary – that the angel (appearing in a dream) announces the miracle of Jesus' conception.

In marked contrast to Luke, Matthew's Mary is given no direct explanation for her pregnancy and no speaking part at all. Joseph is the one who is given to name the child 'Jesus', and after the birth, it's Joseph who will be key to the child's survival. For, like his distant relative, Joseph son of Jacob – he of the coat of many colours – Joseph the husband of Mary is an interpreter of dreams. Three more times, 'an angel of Lord' appears to him in his dreams, first warning him to flee from Herod's murderous rampage, then commanding him to bring his family back to Israel and ultimately instructing him to settle in Nazareth where the child might grow to maturity. Each time, Joseph did as he was commanded; he 'got up, took the child and his mother' (1.14, 21) and got on with it.

At one level, Matthew's take on the circumstances of the Incarnation isn't surprising. He is the evangelist most obviously concerned with emphasising how Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promise to Israel. 'Matthew reminds us time and time again that "this happened to Jesus" or Jesus did or said this or that so that the scriptures [meaning the Hebrew scriptures] could be fulfilled'. According to commentators, this isn't because Matthew is 'looking for random Old Testament

proof-texts that Jesus might somehow fulfil; rather he is thinking about the *shape* of Israel's story and linking Jesus' life with key passages that promise God's unbreakable redemptive love for his people'.¹

As scholar Stanley Hauerwas put it, for Matthew, 'Jesus is identified as "the son of David, the son of Abraham" because he is the one who recapitulates Israel's life. He is the renewing of the law, the promise of the land and the temple. 'Jesus is the long-awaited king. He is the restoration of all that makes Israel the promised people'. So, Hauerwas goes on, 'Through Joseph's adoption, Jesus stands in the line of David ... Jesus is [thus] the climax of Matthew's genealogical story of Israel's past, at once representing [that] story while profoundly transforming the very categories of its existence'.²

Or, as Matthew himself expresses it, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Lo, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means 'God is with us' (Matthew 1.20-23).

So far, so profoundly patriarchal.

Yet there's another dimension to Joseph's way of being in this gospel that I find fascinating. The church often speaks – I've spoken – of Mary as an icon of obedience, integrity and humility. Through her 'yes' to God (as Rowan Williams once put it) 'there is ... a new release of God's presence and power There is more room for God, because the usual obstacles to God's work, in self-preoccupation and fear and resentment, have been overcome in Mary's unswerving willingness to absorb the vision God has given'.³ But isn't all this just as true of Joseph? As for Mary, his expectations for his life are being summarily overthrown; by her pregnancy, he is

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), p.27.

² Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p.31.

³ Rowan Williams, Sermon on the occasion of the National Pilgrimage to The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham Monday 31st May 2004, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1639/national-pilgrimage-to-the-shrine-of-our-lady-of-walsingham#sthash.GgelZm6N.j2UUldpX.dpuf> [accessed 15 August 2015].

humiliated, rendered vulnerable to the judgement of his neighbours, left to deal with his own doubts and fears in the light of (let's face it) a fairly sparse divine communique delivered by way of a dream. Fourth century theologian John Chrysostom praised Joseph 'as a man of exceptional self-restraint since he must have been free of that most tyrannical passion, jealousy'.⁴ Or, as we might express it today, free of the assumptions of entitlement and possession.

As with Mary, Joseph displays the most profound humility. In fact, he is so humble, so self-effacing that we don't even remember to honour his self-effacing-ness! I've just confessed, I've never noticed him at all! How's that for the profound subversion of a patriarchal culture organised around male concern for male honour and shame? In this sense, Joseph, no less than Mary, prefigures the *kenosis* – the radical self-emptying – of Christ on the cross.

So who then is Joseph? What might his meaning be for us? Notice that in the story, he does not utter a word. In fact, there is no report of his direct speech in any of the gospels. That doesn't mean he's not involved, active, present. Indeed, according to Matthew, he seems tuned in at the deepest level of his being – in his dreams and in his body – to the divine speech. And when he becomes aware of it, he responds simply and without drama to what is asked of him. He plays his part. But again notice that, though crucial, it is in fact the part of a minor character. Joseph is not the one who bears the child; he's not the one to redeem Israel or even to proclaim the child's meaning – his role is essentially to protect the space of possibility and enable the action of others. We don't even know when he fades out of the story – just that after the narratives of Jesus' childhood, we never hear of him again.

There's a compulsion many of us feel to 'make a difference' in the world. We're brought up on heroic tales of the 'power of one', stories of charismatic individuals who galvanise social movements for justice and freedom – Martin Luther King Jr and Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, Greta Thunberg and

⁴ Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p.35.

Grace Tame. And such people are extraordinary and do make a difference and are rightly honoured. But there are others of us whose primary contribution may be to realise that we're not the main actor in a given situation, not the one called to make the obviously decisive difference. That doesn't mean we just leave everything up to those we deem more qualified or exceptional than ourselves. But it does mean being willing to get out of the way when necessary, to let go the compulsion to assert our necessity or usefulness, or to insert ourselves (out of anxiety or good intentions) at the centre of events. It means being so attuned to the divine communication that we can play our part (and it may look to be a very minor part) in enabling God's action in the world.

Because ultimately, that's what really matters. Both Matthew and Luke insist that the Incarnation is God's doing ... 'she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 1.18). In the end, all that matters is that we are open to discern what God is doing and how we are called to participate in that. Anything else just gets in the way.

At Christmas, we remember the myriad ways in which the whole community in heaven and on earth was invited to recognise, celebrate and respond to the divine action – angels and shepherds, oxen and Magi, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Simeon and Anna, Mary the mother of God and ... Joseph ... who was a righteous man, a lover of his family and quietly, undramatically, perhaps even unknown to himself, a participant in the salvation of the world.