

**ADVENT 4A 18-12-2022** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 7.10-16; Psalm 80.1-7, 17-19; Romans 1.1-7; *Matthew 1.18-25*

*Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.*

*Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.*

*But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 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:

*'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,*

*and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.'*

*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

Well, there's only a week to go until Christmas. The shops are insanely busy, the ads are all talking about 'last-minute gifts' when some of us have hardly started shopping yet, and many people I've spoken to are already a bit fed up with the whole thing.

For many of us, Christmas means going to church to celebrate the birth of Christ and also celebrating with our families and friends. All the cooking, shopping, gift-wrapping and preparations are worth it when we can sit down together and share meals, and- if we are really lucky- watch children open their presents. We all know that the images of happy Christmas families that we see on TV are a fantasy, because no family is really quite like that; and the unrealistic expectations of a perfect family Christmas can put great pressure on us, and can lead to disappointment when our family won't play the game. The kids cry or sulk, the turkey won't cook, the air conditioner breaks down, mum threatens to run away, the cousins aren't speaking to each other..... it's such a fun time.

Today we hear how the Holy Family began, according to Matthew's gospel.

Mary and Joseph are engaged, but not yet married, and not living together either. So when she 'is found to be with child', the obvious conclusion for Joseph to draw was that his fiancée must have been playing around; or, at the very least, been taken advantage of by some other man.

We are not told how Mary's parents reacted to the news and can only imagine what they might have thought. But Joseph, being a decent sort of chap, decided not to make a fuss and cause Mary and her family even more shame and scandal; he decided to 'dismiss her quietly'.

Perhaps, as used to happen in this country not too many years ago, Mary would have been discreetly sent away to live with a relative so she could have the baby, perhaps give it to someone for adoption, and then come home as if nothing had happened.

Living as an unmarried mother was not an option in first century Israel, just as it was not really an option in our world until relatively recently.

But if this was the plan, it never happened, because Joseph had a dream. Like the other Joseph, the one with the amazing technicolour coat, God spoke to Joseph through his dreams.

He was told to go ahead and marry Mary because she was a good girl and the baby really was God's. Joseph listened and obeyed. He put aside his concerns and married Mary, taking on the roles of her husband and protector and the father of her baby.

We don't know very much about Joseph, and in fact we don't hear anything from Joseph; he doesn't say a word in Matthew's gospel. All we know is that he is described as a righteous man; and he must have been a thoughtful and considerate man because he chose not to make a fuss about his wife-to-be getting pregnant without him.

Joseph was open to God's leading and obedient to God's instructions: he was a godly man. He took on the responsibility for a child who was not his; he was a generous and kind man.

The loveliest, best thing about Joseph is that he must have been an excellent father. As Elizabeth Smith said a few years ago in her study on this text,

"Joseph...managed to show to the boy Jesus the most important thing of all, that he loved having him as his child.

We can count on it, simply because we know for sure that Jesus grew up to preach about a fatherly God who loves having all of us as his children. That was Jesus' message, and it must have been Joseph's gift, that he loved having Jesus as his child."

We know that for some people, the image of God as Father is not helpful, because they have had horribly bad experiences with their fathers. Similarly, the image of God as mother may be difficult for some. But Jesus seems to have had the example of an excellent father in Joseph, so he had no qualms about teaching us to pray "Our Father in heaven...".

We can see that the family in which Jesus grew up did not have an easy start. If Joseph had chosen to ignore his dream he might have broken off his engagement to Mary and the family would never have begun- but he didn't, and Jesus grew up with Joseph as his dad.

However, Christmas, no matter what some might say, is not actually about celebrating the family, or parenthood, or cute little babies. We need to avoid falling into the trap of turning Christmas into a purely sentimental, soft-focus, pastel-coloured celebration.

Christmas is about Jesus, the baby who was born like any other- in blood and pain- and who lived a short and dangerous life, preaching radical change and disturbing religious and political complacency. Even while we tell the story to our children, softening the sharp edges for their benefit, we must keep the adult Jesus in mind.

We cannot lose sight of the Cross as we focus on the baby, because in Jesus we have the whole package: birth, life, death- humanity, experienced by the One who made the Universe.

Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, can identify with our pain and sadness, hunger and thirst, fear and anger- because he is one of us. And we are to continue his work of preaching the Good News to those who are the least, the last, the lost and the lonely. That is our mission, should we choose to accept it, today and every day.

The Lord be with you.