

## Sermon Archive 517

Sunday 5 January, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Matthew 2: 13-15, 19-23

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



If Joseph were a sensitive man, his ears would pick up things that a less sensitive person might miss. And while picking things up that others miss might be described as "perceptiveness", something to be admired, there is a down-side. When you hear the quiet things, the subtle things, they can be like barbs that jag into your feelings.

Consider Joseph listening to the dream-time angel of the Lord. The angel might well have said "Joseph, get up, take your son and wife, and flee to Egypt". But the angel doesn't say that: "your son and wife". The angel says "take the child and his mother".

In the realm of grammar, thoughts and feelings, Joseph is being reminded that Jesus is not his son. In just a few words, "angel speak" puts Jesus and Mary into a togetherness - and puts Joseph outside it. The language is the opposite of "inclusive". If Joseph were a sensitive soul, that might be difficult.

Maybe the sensitive soul, though, might find consolation in the fact that the angel is speaking to *him*, drawing *him* into what must happen next. The angel could have ignored him, and spoken directly to Mary. I mean, Mary's had a history of angels in her ears (hail, favoured one; the Lord is with you). Indeed, the situation is that Jesus *isn't* Joseph's flesh and blood, but at least God still is speaking to him - just as love speaks to adoptive fathers and step fathers and the special uncles of the world. Love bids them come into the story. Because they have love to give, the story is theirs as well. And maybe that is encouragement for the man who hears the angel says "the child and his mother". Is Joseph sensitive? The child and his mother.

-ooOoo-

In another gospel, Luke's gospel, we're told of Mary's reaction to the visitors who come to the stable. In Luke, the visitors are shepherds, who tell her tales of glory in the highest heaven, and peace on earth. Luke says of Mary that

she heard all these things, and treasured them in her heart. She becomes the contemplative mother, the gentle cherisher of mystery and peace.

In **Matthew's** gospel though, the visitors are astrologers from the East - slightly weird and wonderful people who aren't from here. And they're people who've been talking to the paranoid King Herod. Their gold, frankincense and myrrh might have tracker tags secreted within. They might be bringing danger to the stable. So while Luke's Mary emerges from the nativity as the contemplative mother, Matthew's Joseph stumbles forward as one who has nasty nightmares, sees threats everywhere, and is frightened of what the world might do to a child. Is Joseph sensitive? It's not easy being Joseph . . .

-ooOoo-

Here are three thoughts about Joseph.

1. Let's accept his judgment that Jesus is not his son. And indeed, if he's been chaste, he'll know that Mary's not pregnant because of him. We know, from earlier in the story that the revelation of her pregnancy caused him to think all the usual things that a betrayed husband might think. We know that he considered divorcing her. On one level it's not about Joseph and **Jesus**; it's about Joseph and **Mary** - and hurt and broken trust. Touching the trust and hurt, though, is a conviction that he needs to stand by her. Is it love? - despite his better judgment, love remaining? The gospels don't describe him as a "loving" man - only as an "honourable" one. They also describe him as someone who believes that this child is important for the world, because there is something of "God" around him. The child needs protecting by a father, because he is the vulnerable work of God.

If you came across something vulnerable, but of God, what might it be? A hope in the heart of someone who is ill? A tenuous scrap of vocation still left after a time of discouragement in ministry? A seemingly idle tale told by women who've found an empty tomb? Someone saying "I believe; help my unbelief"? These tender things not of our making, but with the fingerprint of God on them . . . would we not come forward to protect them? Joseph would, and did. Was he sensitive? He calls us to ponder.

2. We are led to believe that fearful Joseph (jumping at the shadows) was much older than Mary (contemplative cherisher). We don't know whether teenage Mary was perhaps a bit naive. Certainly, she fairly meekly

accepts what the angel tells her about her pregnancy, and says to it "OK, let that be unto me, according to your word". She seems inclined to believe. When she accompanies Joseph to Egypt, we're not told what she believed. For *his* part, the much older Joseph is fleeing because he's willing to believe (in a most naive way) that adults will kill children. He's willing to believe that genocide is a thing. He's capable of reading a crown report on abuse in state and faith-based care accepting that it's probably true.

I wonder if that acceptance tends to come to us only after we've been alive a while. I wonder if age brings acquaintance with grief, and acquaintance with grief heightens our responsiveness to protect. We often mourn the loss of innocence. We sometimes see loss of innocence as something that makes us "useless for hope". But in this story, it is the older person who sees the need to flee to Egypt - and so becomes the agent of the protection that is needed by God. If you are becoming sadder in your assessment of the world, if some of the rose tint is leaving your spectacles, then you might wonder whether you are losing usefulness to God. Consider Joseph. Is he over-sensitive - or desensitised by the trouble of the world? He does what needs to be done - and he calls us to ponder.

**3.** Joseph is told in his dream to go Egypt and to stay there until a further dream brings him a new instruction. So he goes. One imagines, but does not know for certain, that he set up a carpentry business, or found a local business to work for. How long is this going to take before he can get on with the life might have planned? Who knows; he needs to wait until the next dream comes.

In exile, he'll make new friends, as will Mary. The child will grow. Things may settle. There will be busy days in the workshop, a growing list of those who've appreciated his work, and might form some kind of client list. You don't develop those sorts of things overnight. Jacky, local hairdresser, says client lists take time - which is fine if time you have! Does Joseph have time?

I wonder if Joseph ever got up in the morning and wondered maybe if he'd had the all-important dream that night but had forgotten. Dreams do often "fly, forgotten at the opening day". What if it was safe to go home, but he'd missed the dream? What if he's marking time in this temporary place when he doesn't need to? That would be a waste of life . . . unless, of course, you found yourself enjoying Egypt! It would be good to have some "director

of life" that was more precise than our capacity to dream - mark and measure the imprecision of a dream.

Have you, I wonder, ever found yourself settling into something that feels like a holding pattern, while you waited for "you know not quite what". Have you ever felt like a properly organised journey of life ought to have deadlines and boxes clearly ticked? Have you feared that grace isn't sufficient for this day, and found an impatience tugging at your heart - or worse, a fear that you've missed some important sign? Consider Joseph. An angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream and said "get up and go". The story of Joseph suggests that the important thing will be announced. Is Joseph sensitive enough to notice the dream? Joseph calls us to ponder.

-ooOoo-

We go back to the beginning. Joseph, who may or may not be a sensitive man, hears an angel describing his relationship with Jesus as a bit disconnected - like the story of salvation is not really his. Jesus is not his son, Mary is not his wife. They are the child and his mother - so who is Joseph in this unfolding tale?

It seems, as good news to all of us who follow, that despite our fears that **God's** story is not really **our** story, we may be called to play a part in it for which we most perfectly are fashioned. We might be foolish. We might be old. We might be sidelined by the important. We might be inclined to understand the violence and darkness of the world. We may be worried that we're not dreaming right. But we are called to protect the vulnerable things of God that come before us.

Gathered around the table at which God will feed us, on the first Sunday of a brand new year, consider the character of Joseph, and listen for the call of God.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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