

Sermon Archive 518

Sunday 12 January, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

The Growth and Baptism of the Lord

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Introduction: Remember sensitive Joseph?

Last week, we dug around what Joseph might have thought when an angelic voice described Jesus not as his "son", but as "his wife's child". We wondered about how that phrasing might have cut into any complicated feelings he might have been having about how he stood in relation to his wife (and the possibly battered trust upon which he was building his marriage) - but also to the whole family "thing". Jesus and Mary have an obvious bond (blood and birth). The bond for Joseph is not so obvious. Where does he stand in the family relationship map? Is their story his as well?

I think, by the end of last week's sermon, we were finding that Joseph had a real and serious role to play in that story of being the father figure. We even found that various facets of his personality maybe perceived as disqualifying him from the God story were not barriers to "usefulness in God". Instead they were actually things that qualified him perfectly to play the role of "protector of the youthful Christ". We kind of comforted Joseph (and all those like him today) to dare in the quiet of their own thoughts, to believe that they, as much as Mary, were called into loving and caring for what God has made.

So, with our clever theological meditation behind him, and with a cultural general assumption that every child needs a father figure, Joseph had come back from his flight to Egypt, set up home in Nazareth, and got on with loving and caring for the child. Doubts and fears over distance be damned! Joseph is getting on, in real time, as best he can, with treating the child as his fatherly responsibility - his son - ordinarily, in the real world, his son.

Well, one year becomes two, then four, then eight. Then twelve. How normal can things become in twelve years! Maybe he settles into his fatherly role . .

Hymn: My God, you called me rise

Reading: Luke 2: 41-52

Reflection: Moving to a new house

I'm not sure that, twelve years after Joseph might have been sensitive about the language used to describe his relationship with Jesus, that he'd still be critiquing the grammar. But if he did, he might have been heartened by a quick phrase that came from Mary when they found the missing Jesus. She's speaking in a time of stress relieved - so in a time where things are pretty unguarded. For "unguarded", read "honest".

With the missing boy finally found, she blurts out "your father and I have been looking for you".

"Your father and I".

Twelve years of normalisation, since protecting (running off to Egypt, waiting, coming home, caring for the child as a father) have soaked through into a new grammar - where Joseph is described as "your father".

There are moments, aren't there, where it's acknowledged that status has changed. When people marry, they call upon the community to witness that two have become one. A change of relational status is "outed". But how about transitions prior to that? Yes, when the engagement ring is given and received, then it's acknowledged that it's now fiancée and fiancé. How about earlier than that? When someone mysteriously special in the company of your child comes to stay at your place, and you're unsure about whether you need to provide two rooms or one. Or that wonderful, dreadful moment when you're negotiating whether you want to call someone your friend, good friend, close friend, love. What do you call them?

The fluidity of the way that relationships grow (and sometimes fade) put our language under pressure. And as the words move in and out of focus, dealing more or less well with who we are in relationship to others, it's all a bit tender.

But here's one of those clarifying moments! After twelve years of raising the boy, though, and cementing into normality all the relational relations, Joseph probably isn't going to derive too much from Mary (talking to Jesus) referring to him as "your father". After twelve years, "father"? After twelve years, "father", yes.

But . . . Just after Mary tells Jesus that she and his father were worried, **he** tells **her** that she shouldn't have been. Could she not have seen, obviously, that her child would be found in his "father's house"?

I don't know whether this "outing" of the **other** father - the One who owns a house - is necessarily a snub to Joseph - although, if he's the sensitive person described in last week's sermon, maybe it might be taken as such. After twelve years of love and protection, another father is on the lips of the child.

I am not a father. Good fathers tell me, though, that there are various moments in their fathering when they know that their children are growing up. And while sometimes, in the fullness of times, children come home again, and learn a new love and appreciation for their parents, there are those in-between times when children need to distance, to reject, to complain, to stretch, to condemn. During these times, foolish and hurtful things can be said.

At the age of twelve, Jesus says that his parents were stupid for not knowing that of course, he had a deeper loyalty than to them. It's phrased in terms of Jesus wanting to be in his "real Father's house".

Was Joseph a sensitive man? Is Jesus a silly young thing, who hurts the feelings of those around him? Indeed, he's only twelve. Or is he news to us, that "those in God" always are growing into something larger than before? Is he news of a shifting of values, of creed, of calling, that comes from the pregnancy of time and the need of the future, and the groaning of new creation? **Maybe** Joseph is seeing the growing pains of the new creation . . . when **are** we seeing the first-fruits of the new creation? Maybe someone ought to have preached a sermon about that two weeks ago!

Music for Reflection

Reading: Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Reflection: The voice lays claim

By the time that Jesus was baptised by John, it's generally reckoned that Joseph already was dead. I've not really thought about this before, but I wonder whether the death of his father-figure might have been part of what freed Jesus to get on with his ministry. Sometimes duty keeps us at home. Never mind!

Stepping out into this new phase of life, Jesus presents himself for baptism - a public confession of his sin and desire to be a person of Godly life. The theologians will worry about his buying into a ritual of confession of sin,

since he must have been sinless. Yes, OK. On this count, we'll forgive sins made by twelve year olds as they hurt their maybe-fathers.

The big thing happening at his baptism, is that the whole world gets to hear a voice from heaven, claiming Jesus as its Son. The people telling the story of Jesus for people of faith like us, take pains to record that at the start of his ministry, Jesus is no longer mainly (but still is) the child of Mary, the One protected by Joseph, but the child of the One who sends the Holy Spirit. And that's the end of this part of the sermon, written from within the frame of a sensitive person called Joseph.

-ooOoo-

What happens now? What happens now is that we watch where the story goes next. No mention ever again is made of Joseph. The Catholic Church venerates him as a saint. He's given patronages all appropriate to those who care and protect. So that's all fine and good.

The main thing now, though, is to rejoice in how the protected One of Joseph now goes on to grow in his understanding of to whom he belongs. His going missing in the temple as a twelve year old, his being claimed by the voice from above when baptised at thirty, his realising that he belongs to a house other than the one in which he'd grown up - these are the signs that God is calling him from the future to be the first-fruits of the new creation.

Into our lives comes the call to be available to the new creation. Maybe that was the call issued all those years ago to Joseph, when he felt a need to protect a tiny, little child. Who knows?

Even now, even if we think that Joseph now needs to take a step back, we wonder, in our engagement with sacred story, whether indeed it might be time to step forward as children of the "other father". Is a new identity for us, who follow Jesus, waiting to be found? The other father is calling?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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