

Advent 4 Matthew 1:18-25

As we come to the 4th Sunday in Advent we begin to focus on the story of the birth of Jesus in earnest. We have considered all of the prophecies and patriarchal history which led to this life changing event and now we are told how it began for the people directly involved. In year A, we follow primarily the gospel of Matthew and although our understanding of the nativity story is a composite of all the gospels, each one is different from the others when it comes to describing the birth of Jesus, indeed only Matthew and Luke include a birth narrative at all!

Whereas Advent 4 was traditionally focussed on Mary, the mother of Jesus, in Matthew's gospel we are more drawn to Joseph. Mary, we are told, has become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, we are not told, however, about her encounter with the angel Gabriel as acted out in any traditional school nativity play. No, in Matthew's gospel Mary was simply pregnant, her explanation was the Holy Spirit but clearly Joseph didn't really take that seriously. He was intending to break off the engagement quietly, because he loved her, we suppose, and he was a good man who didn't want to see this young woman shamed and possibly attacked for a mistake. But then, in a dream, Joseph encounters an angel of the Lord and all is in place for his role with Mary as earthly parents of the Son of God.

So from Matthew, there is no description of the agonising of Mary and the submission of that brave young woman to the will of God, far more important to note for this gospel writer are the actions of Joseph in taking Mary as his wife despite the mysterious circumstances of her pregnancy. Joseph is not very visible in the other gospels and it is worth reflecting on the part that he played in God's plan. Had Joseph divorced Mary, she would have been living with her family, a single mother at a time and place where pregnancy outside of marriage was punishable by death. Had her family been unwilling to accept her shame, Mary would have been destitute. Joseph was every bit as vital to God's plan as Mary.

Both Mary and Joseph allowed themselves to be instruments of God's plan for all people. By their faith and trust in God they were enabled to accept incredible circumstances and in the end were entrusted with the birth, nurture and parenting of the messiah. They were unremarkable, just like other people from the outside, a couple preparing for a life together that should have been unremarkable. They were as surprised by this miraculous pregnancy as any of us would have been, there was even doubt. And yet, ultimately they each said yes to God. They were chosen for no other reason than God knew that they were faithful. They couldn't offer the best home, they spent much of Jesus' childhood as refugees in Egypt, but they were people of faith who had the strength to say yes to God.

Let's not pretend that saying yes to God is always the easy answer. It certainly wasn't for Joseph, far easier to explain to his family and friends that Mary and he were separating and distancing himself from any suspicion of infidelity. Certainly, carrying a child and having to explain the circumstances of that pregnancy to her betrothed was not the easy option for

Mary either. The easy way is not always the right way, however. In fact, the easy way is often not the right way. Being faithful, putting God's will first, hearing and responding to the call of God in our lives does not come easily for most of us. The great privilege of free will comes with a tendency to seek answers from ourselves first, to be masters of our own destiny rather than faithful followers of the path God sets before us. No matter how many times we see God's hand at work in our lives we still tend to revert to self-reliance once things are going our way again. But as we draw this waiting season of advent to a close, we are blessed by this reminder that waiting on God is what yields results, not waiting for our own ideas to bear fruit.

We have the benefit of hindsight to know that the story of Jesus' birth worked itself out to its God intended fruition but for Mary and Joseph they had no such assurances, they had only faith. How many times must they have wondered if they had done the right thing, both independently and as a family. Yet, their faith sustained them. Throughout the difficulties of the birth, the strange visitors to bring gifts to the child, the escape to Egypt and all that was to come, Mary and Joseph held firm in their faith, it was because of that faith they were chosen and by that faith that they succeeded.

As we look ahead to the season of Christmas let us be reminded that God sent Jesus amongst us in order that we may have a relationship with him. We do not instigate that relationship; we respond to it. We must make space to listen and to hear God's call in our lives, just like Joseph did. We must let God in to our decision making, relying on God rather than self just like Joseph did. As Christmas approaches, let us be awed once again at the love God has for each of us, shown in the birth of Jesus, and just like Mary and Joseph, may we be faithful hearers and responders to God's word.