

Remember Joseph ...

... *prepare to be surprised*

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, on 22 December 2019, in Beverley Minster.

Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-end

Well it's been a funny old year hasn't it? Who would have thought a year ago that by the end of 2019, a former panellist on 'Have I Got News For You' would be Prime Minister? Or that Notre Dame cathedral would have gone up in smoke? Or even that James Dean would be cast in a new movie more than 60 years after his death? Life is nothing if not unpredictable, and no doubt many of us here will have experienced things this year that we weren't expecting: family news perhaps; health news possibly; work news even; news that came out of the blue. Maybe it was something good, maybe less so, but I'm sure there will be many of us here this morning who have experienced something this year that we didn't see coming. And that's despite trying to live sensibly, trying to avoid risks and trying to use our common sense.

I think of Mary's fiancée Joseph as being a bit like that. On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we're supposed to focus on Mary's calling, but whenever it's Matthew's version of the nativity that comes up, the emphasis is always on Joseph, so I'm focusing on him a bit this morning. I think of him as a practical man: a carpenter, not given to flights of fancy; a man who is sensible, hardworking, full of common-sense and decency. Joseph probably thought he had his life under control and planned out: the business was doing okay; he was engaged to this nice young girl Mary; he had hopes of a family and of becoming a respected figure in the community --- and then he learns that his betrothed is expecting a baby. He didn't see **that** coming: all he knows for sure is that he isn't the father, and in a moment all his carefully laid plans, all his modest and sensible expectations for the future have suddenly evaporated, without warning. It's been said hasn't it that if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans, and Joseph must have felt at that point that God was having a real belly laugh.

Joel and Ethan Coen are American filmmakers who specialise in films telling stories about carefully laid plans going wrong. Often they are the plans of criminals and no-hopers. But the storylines tend to focus on some scheme requiring careful planning and preparation, which then gets derailed by a series of random and wholly unforeseeable events. There's a lot of black humour in these films, coming out of futile human attempts to impose order on events which are out of control, and you get a sense that behind these storylines there is a view of reality as fundamentally absurd and meaningless. Philosophers have a word for this unpredictable quality of the world: they call it 'contingency'. The world is 'contingent', meaning it is free: one thing doesn't necessarily lead to another; reality is not a closed system governed entirely by a fixed set of rules, so you can't sit in an armchair and predict what's going to happen just by starting from first principles. And the more physicists discover about the universe, the more surprising and the less predictable it seems, even though certain things are still perfectly orderly: the world still turns on its axis; night still follows day; and the force of gravity remains constant and so on.

So if the news of Mary's pregnancy is, for Joseph, evidence of life's contingency, of its unpredictability and resistance to being planned and ordered, what should he conclude from that? One conclusion might be that the universe is indeed meaningless and that you cannot make sense of it: that's the conclusion people like the Coen brothers seem to reach, which can lead you towards cynicism and despair, making you want to withdraw back into your shell and try and avoid any kind of risk. But another conclusion might be that if the universe is dependent upon and open to an eternal and infinite Creator: then you would expect it to have features that are mysterious and unpredictable. A world which is the handiwork of an eternal creator will never be fathomed by us: it will have an endless capacity for renewal and surprise, because it is free and open to eternity, not fixed and closed and finite and locked down. And that conclusion might make you more open and responsive, more ready to trust and to live hopefully.

What we see in this morning's Gospel reading is Joseph coming to terms with his plans being upset and undertaking a kind of a journey: from conventional righteousness to spiritual responsiveness; from outward religion to inner renewal;

from fear and anxiety to confident faith. Joseph discovers that the ways of practical common-sense aren't enough when the chips are down and when you're hit by unpredictable betrayal and disappointment, conventional morality just makes you bitter and judgmental: being sensible and self-reliant is no use at all when other people let you down and you face humiliation and shame.

But Joseph is given a glimpse of the bigger meaning behind the unpredictable events that have upset his plans: the angel tells him that Mary's child has been conceived from the Holy Spirit; that her pregnancy is the result of heaven touching Earth; of the eternal entering time and history; of the divine becoming human. The angel tells Joseph that the child is to be called Jesus, a name that means 'God saves', because there is something redemptive about this child: he comes to fulfil a particular mission, bringing forgiveness and grace, and reconciliation and healing to a fragmented and alienated world - there's a purpose behind all of this.

The angel also tells Joseph that Mary's baby will fulfil the prophecy of a child called Emmanuel: 'God with us'; God coming alongside, knowing and being known; entering our human condition. Joseph is open and responsive to what the angel tells him: he doesn't allow his common sense to reject it; he keeps an open mind; he has no definite evidence yet that what the angel says is true, but he suspends judgment and watches and waits to see what's going to happen. As the months go by and he sees the change in Mary and her faith (and perhaps his own prayers become more real), so his attitude of openness settles into an attitude of faith, of a deeper trust in God and a determination to live as if it were all true, and he revises his own plans in the light of that faith.

Joseph's life far from being shattered by the overturning of his plans and in the discovery that Mary is to have someone else's child instead, his life is renewed: his quality of practical decency which might have become stern and judgmental in the light of events, is transformed into a responsive faith, eager to see God's promises fulfilled. So when the time comes for Mary to have her baby, Joseph is more than ready to care for them both: to protect them from Herod's murderous rage; to find them safe refuge in Egypt; to cope with further unpredictable disruptions and disturbances.

So where does that leave you and me? How do we respond when life turns our plans upside down? Do we conclude that it's all meaningless, that there is no God, or if there is he doesn't care? Or do we trust that God's purpose might be bigger than ours, and that in learning to trust more deeply, our lives can be renewed. God is unpredictable. C.S. Lewis once said that God is the great iconoclast: that is, whenever we think we formed a picture or gained an understanding of him, He will destroy it. And Christmas is one of those moments of divine unpredictability: who would have expected the creator of the cosmos could be born in a stable, out the back of a pub in a village on the edge of the known world. And yet that surprising action speaks to all who are on the edge, all the people who feel marginalised, unimportant, whose voices go unheard. Because of God's unpredictability, we all receive the promise that Emmanuel has been born and his name is Jesus, because he saves us from our sins.

I wonder, do you find that unpredictability threatening - does it raise the prospect of a God who comes to disturb our complacency and unsettle our narrow and selfish concerns? Or do you find it exciting - a sense of eternity breaking into our world, of heaven touching earth, to redeem, renew and transform everything because the Lord is near and can be encountered in anything?

This Christmas, may your journey be a bit like that of Joseph, that in the midst of familiar rituals and careful plans you find room to be surprised, to let God seize the initiative, to find room for his presence to be recognised and celebrated with a deepening faith and a richer vision of his purpose for your life and for the world in which you live.

This Christmas may you grow in faith and deepen your trust in the one who invites you to surrender to him all your plans, so that he can include you in his own.

Reading Texts

Romans 1:1-7

¹ Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³ the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶ including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, ⁷ To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew 1:18-end

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.