

Joseph ...

... the practical man of adult faith

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, on 29 December 2019, in Beverley Minster.

Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-end

When we say "Christmas is a time for the children", we're not usually thinking of the part played in the story by King Herod. On Christmas Day, we're at the manger with the shepherds, marvelling at the miracle of new birth, and amazed that God could come to save his world in a state of such helpless vulnerability. The new born child draws out from us a sense of wonder and gratitude and love, that God could become one of us in such a way and in such helpless dependency. But the story doesn't get very far before we realise that the coming of Emmanuel, 'God with us', carries a price-tag: the gospel reading tells how King Herod, in a state of murderous paranoia, responds to news of a rival King being born by ordering that all the little boys in Bethlehem should be slaughtered. It's a sobering thought that if God had not taken human flesh that first Christmas night, the other little boys of Bethlehem would have lived - and that's the 'flip-side' of Christmas: that's what it cost for the words to become flesh.

There is here almost a kind of reverse gospel: instead of Christ's dying in our place, there is a sense that these children died in Jesus's place. And you could argue that this is a pattern that continues right up to our own day: wherever children are abused in dysfunctional families or by unscrupulous adults; wherever children live in fear of violence or are forced to flee as refugees because of modern-day King Herods; wherever children suffer hunger or malnutrition because of the greed or corruption of adults; wherever children learn the meaning of despair because inhumane immigration controls in comfortable Western nations deny them a refuge. Underneath it all is a rejection of Jesus Christ - children suffer when adults fear the disturbance that welcoming Christ will involve, and so hearts remain closed, faces remain hard, and fists remain clenched in order to hang on to the power and control we instinctively feel is threatened by Jesus. And the first victims of that are always

the children. If Christmas highlights a kind of reverse gospel, it perhaps also brings out a reverse spirituality, because how do you pray if God is a baby: picture God as a father and you approach him as a child seeking comfort protection and guidance; picture God as a king and you approach him as a supplicant seeking favours and solutions to problems; picture God as a judge and you approach him as one in need of mercy and forgiveness.

But what if God is a baby? How do you approach him then? Our role-model for approaching the infant Christ in this passage is Joseph: it's Joseph who is repeatedly responsive to angelic messages; it's Joseph who takes responsibility for keeping the infant Christ safe, who gets the family moving under cover of darkness to keep them safe; it's Joseph who shows initiative, is proactive, who gets things done. From the beginning of the story we see Joseph willing to change his mind about Mary, having initially wanted to break off his engagement to her. We see him risking the scorn of others, resourcefully finding a dry and warm shelter in the crisis of Mary's labour. We see him willing to give up his home and business for the sake of a woman he's not married to and a child not his own. And if we look further ahead in the story we can safely assume that many of Jesus's attitudes are learned from his step-father: that Joseph teaches Jesus to respect women; to honour children; to have compassion for the sick and for outcasts; to look for the spirit rather than the letter of the law; not to grovel to the Romans. As Sarah Maitland puts it, 'Joseph brings up a step-son who lives joyfully and dies bravely and is not obsessed by his mother.'

Joseph suggests a grown-up spirituality, where we see God not as the super-hero to whom we go with all our problems, but as the one who stirs our compassion, who encourages us to respond to the weak and the infirm and the vulnerable and yes, to reach out to children in need. Joseph gives us a model of faith which leads not to surrendering responsibility but rather to taking it up. His suggests an 'adult faith', a faith not of letting go of our minds and our ambitions but rather an offering-up of all our powers and resources, all our energies and gifts, and focusing them in the service of the poor, the marginalised, the refugee, the orphan and those whose voices are never heard.

Joseph's model suggests an ambitious faith, a resourceful faith, unafraid to find a way around the tyrants, the bully boys, and the vested interests. Joseph's spirituality

is not one of merely passive prayer and contemplation: he responds to God's revelation in taking action; in living out his faith in daily life; in seeking to change the world and make it a fairer and more just place. So if you are a 'do-er' and the thought of contemplative prayer horrifies you, it may come as a relief to discover that there are other kinds of spirituality. At Christmas, God comes to you and me as one younger than us, new-born, fresh bursting with life and growth; he comes also in weakness, a child at risk in need of parental protection. And he invites us to take on that role - the young king is seeking regents to rule on his behalf, who will take control and work for the good of his kingdom.

I suggested earlier that the shadow-side of Christmas involves a kind of reverse gospel, that the children of Bethlehem die in order that the baby Jesus might live. And that reversing of the Gospel also affects you and me: we, who when the word becomes flesh are given power to become children of God, are also in a sense invited to become adoptive parents to the Christ child just like Joseph - we stand in loco parentis for God the Son, as we respond to Jesus, as we take responsibility for our faith and nurture it and protect it and see that it grows up and reaches maturity.

As Saint Teresa of Avila famously said, "Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands, no feet on earth but yours; yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world; yours are the feet with which he walks to do good; yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world". I think Saint Teresa and Saint Joseph probably would have got on very well together - they encourage us to think afresh about the pictures we have of God and to remember that God first of all manifests himself as a helpless child.

They encourage us to think about how we respond to the God who is always with us, but who does not always do things for us, but who instead expects us to work out, on occasion, what we may do for him.

Reading Texts

Isaiah 63:7-9

⁷ I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favour to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. ⁸ For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely"; and he became their saviour ⁹ in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old

Matthew 2:13-end

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." ¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." ¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." ²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."