

Joseph - descended from King David ...

... linking Jesus to the wider story of God's people

A sermon given on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 18th December 2022 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 1:18-end

Well, poor old Prince Harry. I haven't been watching Harry and Meghan's Netflix special, but I have seen the headlines and he clearly hasn't had a happy time. And he's written a book called *Spare*, reflecting the old saying that 'every king needs an heir and a spare' And one can understand the negative emotions that go with being a permanent number two: envy; disappointment; resentment; that sense of 'if only'; and of 'what might have been'. It's the feelings that go with being left out.

Now changing tracks slightly, I understand this afternoon there is going to be a football match and it's probably just as well for all our blood pressures that England aren't involved. But back in 1966 one of our star players was left out - Jimmy Greaves. He was the outstanding striker of his generation and he's still today one of the top five England goal-scorers of all time and he was a natural choice for the England team. But in the last group stage match against France he was injured and so he was replaced in the quarter final by Geoff Hurst who scored the winning goal against Argentina. And even though Greavesie was fit in time for subsequent matches, Geoff Hurst kept his place in the team all the way to the final where he scored a hat trick against Germany to win the tournament. In those days there were no substitutions during a match and only the eleven players on the pitch at the end of the final received their winners' medals. And Jimmy Greaves later wrote, *"I danced around the pitch with everyone else but even in this moment of triumph and great happiness, deep down I felt my sadness. Throughout my years as a professional footballer I had dreamed of playing in a world cup final. I had missed out on the match of a lifetime and it hurt."*

It is an awful thing to feel 'left out'; to feel that everyone else is enjoying something from which you have been excluded; to have, as it were, your nose pressed up against the window on the outside watching the glowing fire and the good cheer of the party going on on the inside. And today, on this last Sunday of Advent the focus is supposed to be on Mary as she receives the news that she is to be the mother of the Messiah. But because of the way the lectionary works, this year we get Matthew's version of the story which tells the tale from the point of view of Joseph, and Joseph is the spare: Joseph is the one who feels side-lined; who's missed out; who has been rendered unnecessary.

Joseph discovered that Mary is expecting a baby. No doubt she tells him about the angel Gabriel's visitation, about the promise that she is to bear the son of the Most High God as a result of the action of the Holy Spirit. Presumably Joseph didn't believe her because he plans to break off the engagement and dismiss her. He would have felt that Mary's affections were not truly directed at him, but were focused somewhere else; that he had been side-lined. But even if he had believed her, would he have been happy? Surely he would have felt a bit like Jimmy Greaves, delighted that Mary should be so honoured, but wondering where exactly he fitted into the story.

And maybe you sometimes have felt like that. I'm sure all of us at one time or another have felt second-best, unimportant, passed over and overlooked. But maybe it's happened to you in church: maybe you felt like a spare part in God's purposes; you worship here at Beverley Minster; you're conscious of the privilege of worshipping in such a beautiful, impressive place. But it's an easy place to feel a bit of an outsider. Maybe you've worshipped here for years, but you've never felt you've been able to get under the skin of the place. Other people seem to know each other, they all seem to know they belong, and you're left feeling on the edge. Or maybe you know you belong here, but sometimes things happen that make you wonder: new people get asked to do things and you don't; decisions get made about things that you're involved in, but we don't know anything about it; we feel we're not consulted; that nobody tells us anything; that the real action is going on somewhere else - maybe God himself doesn't have any real use for me; maybe I'm just a 'spare', like Joseph, wondering where I fit into the story.

Well, it is of course true that Joseph is not Jesus's father. He is not, in that sense, essential to the Christmas story. But he does have a very important part to play nonetheless. It is Joseph, not Mary, who is descended from King David, so Jesus's messianic pedigree comes from Joseph, not through Mary - and in that sense, it's Joseph who links Jesus with the wider story of God and his people. And after Jesus is born, it is Joseph who rescues Mary and Jesus from the murderous attention of King Herod. He's the one who has a dream telling him to get out of Bethlehem. And he's the one who has the presence of mind to get Mary and Jesus together and off to the relative safety of Egypt. And it's Joseph who receives the revelation about the names of Mary's child - the angel tells him to name the child Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins (which is what the name means in Hebrew). And it's to Joseph that the angel reveals the prophetic title for the Messiah, 'Emmanuel' - which means 'God is with us'. And Joseph responds to the revelation by taking Mary as his wife and by calling the baby Jesus as instructed. And it's because of Joseph's story that we know the message of Christmas is about Emmanuel - 'God is with us'.

So, in his own way, Joseph responds just like Mary. He receives the angelic message and in the midst of all sorts of questions and misgivings, takes the risk of trusting that revelation and acting upon it. So, far from being a spare, Joseph provides us with a model of faith.

We too can receive the revelation of Jesus, born to save the world from its sins. We too can identify Jesus with the promise of Emmanuel 'God with us'. And we too can respond with faith and obedience, taking the risk of receiving Jesus so that others can receive him too.

In 2009, only 43 years after the event, FIFA eventually presented Jimmy Greaves with his medal for being part of the winning squad in 1966. Joseph didn't have to wait that long, and neither do you or I.

We have been entrusted with the revelation of Emmanuel - 'God with us' - we are here to receive that promise today because each of us is blessed by God.

And we are entrusted with that message, to share it, to pass it on, and to tell the world that there is a saviour for our sins.

Reading Text

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 fulfil 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.