

A Righteous Man

As we approach Christmas, we reflect on one of the greatest of all moments, when God, in his Son, acted in history. He entered into the messiness of human life to bring his salvation. Matthew has just given us Jesus' genealogy and traced the history of his family in the first seventeen verses of this chapter. Just like the SBS program 'Who do you think you are?', in which well known people trace the histories of their families (often with surprising discoveries), so Jesus' family line is spelled out (with some surprises) to show his family line. The big question for Matthew is not so much 'What did Jesus do?', as 'Who is he?' He seems to be saying to his readers, 'I want you to take seriously what he says because of who he is'. And then in verse 18, he picks up the story of Joseph, his wife to be and the birth of Israel's final and true king, Jesus the Messiah.

Our Christmas story begins with controversy. This account of Jesus' birth concentrates on the role of Joseph, 'a righteous man'. (Please READ verse 18, 19). Often at Christmas we focus on Mary, her wonderful faith and obedient submission to the will of God, but today we are thinking of the overlooked role played by Joseph. He was 'pledged to be married' to Mary. Some versions say 'betrothed' or 'engaged'. In that society this means an agreement between two families regarding the marriage of the couple. The woman remained in her father's house during this period and no sexual intercourse took place. This is so different from today when couples live together without a public and recognised commitment to each other. But this relationship between Joseph and Mary was binding and much stronger than our modern practice of engagement.

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So here we have Joseph's dilemma. The discovery of a partner's unfaithfulness always brings pain, a profound sense of betrayal and hurt and an anger that is difficult to control. In Jewish village culture it threatened public humiliation for both Mary and her intended husband who would lose face in this situation. Unmarried Mary is pregnant and must face her fiancé and family - and in a culture that had little time for women in such disgrace. One can imagine the village 'title tattle'. Yet Joseph's righteousness is displayed in his compassionate concern for his young bride. 'He did not want to expose her to public disgrace'. His plan was to divorce her quietly. But before he can do that, God intervenes with the assurance that the baby's conception is the work of the Holy Spirit. God is behind all this. It is his will. So Joseph, with faith and obedience no less than his young bride, takes the pregnant Mary into his home as his wife. He cares for her until the birth of the child, to whom he gives the name 'Jesus'.

As we approach Christmas, let us honour the faith and kindness of righteous Joseph. He is a model of male identity. He is characterised by compassion, gentleness and submission to the will of God. Do we not need to learn from that today? As we look at the example of Joseph do we need to see righteousness worked out in our family relationships? What would it mean for Australian men to behave and act like Joseph? What can we learn from him?

The other noticeable aspect of this passage is the emphasis placed on names, the names given for the baby.

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Now naming is one of the greatest joys of the arrival of a new child. The new parents give much thought to names. Some couples even buy books to help them with the task. Lots of different factors go into deciding what is suitable and acceptable. A family name, maybe. A name with a particular meaning. A different name, possibly. A strong name, whatever that is. A fashionable name. This year the most popular names are Oliver for boys and Amelia for girls.

For Joseph, the righteous man, there was no choice. He was given the baby's name and title. (Please READ verses 20–25). The name he was to be called is 'Jesus'. The meaning is all important. It means 'The Lord saves' or 'He will save'. It is the Greek form of Joshua, the great Old Testament leader. But God's messenger, the angel of the Lord, told Joseph that the reason for the name was that he would 'save his people from their sins'. In the first instance 'his people' was the Jews, the chosen race. However Matthew, who finished off his Gospel with the command of the risen Jesus to 'go and make disciples of all nations', would have had a wider understanding in mind here. 'His people' includes all those who from whatever nation or background, call him their Lord and Saviour.

And note it is to be salvation from 'sins'. The Jews at this time were expecting a Saviour. Indeed many had risen up in earlier times, claiming to be God's Messiah and/or Saviour, and calling the people to rise up and revolt against their political captors, the Roman authorities. But Jesus is not to save his people from the Romans. He is not a national liberator, a political or military leader. So what sort of saviour is he? He is to save people from their sins. It is this fundamental need that needs to be addressed. Now people do need a lot of saving. Saving from harm and accidents. Saving from debt and financial ruin. Saving from addictions and bad habits. Saving from fear and loneliness. All very important for

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these can cripple and destroy people's lives. However the salvation Jesus came to secure was more fundamental. It was the basic reconciliation of human beings with their Creator God. For it is human sin that separates us from him. For the Jewish people of Jesus' day it was their spiritual disobedience which caused individuals and the nation to go through conquest and captivity. They had turned their backs on God and gone their own way. They had disobeyed his commands and refused to trust him. They had ignored his messengers and rejected their warnings. All this added up to the basic sin of disobeying God and thinking they could do better without him following their own desires. And this state of affairs describes all human history and is completely up to date for us all today. We too need a Saviour, a Saviour from sin. And because Jesus has come to be our Saviour we rejoice. In the Christmas carol 'O little town of Bethlehem', the last verse begins 'O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today.' Jesus will save his people from their sins.

But there is more. Mary's child has another name, although really it is a title given through ancient prophecy. He is 'Immanuel', God with us. (Please READ verses 22 and 23.) The name is found back in the Old Testament, in the Prophet Isaiah. The point is not that Jesus ever had Immanuel as a actual name, but that it indicates his role, bringing God's presence to mankind. It is related to that of his actual name, Jesus, in that it is sin which separates man from God's presence, so that salvation from sin results in 'God with us'. Throughout their history, God's people had experienced his coming and going from among them. God, who had led them through the wilderness into the Promised Land and dwelt in the Temple's holy of holies, but who left that place when they went into exile, has now returned to stay – in Jesus. And in the climax of his gospel,

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Matthew tells us Jesus promises to be with us always. 'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.' (28:20). Truly, God is with us.

At the heart of being a Christian it is not a system of beliefs but a permanent presence. It is a relationship with the living God, through Jesus. So the question for us today is 'Do we live as though we believe that God is with us?' The final verse of 'O little town of Bethlehem' ends like this. 'We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel'. Amen.