

Taking a risk

Joseph's Brother

Reading Matthew 1:18-24

Oh my word, you should have heard me Ma. Mary came back from visiting some relative in the Judean hills with a small but definite bump. Ma hit the roof. Of course, she thought Joseph had done it. And he was in all the more trouble because he was the LAST one she would have suspected of shenanigans. If you know what I mean.

If it had been me, it would have been less of a surprise. I'm Joe's brother you see. He's a few years older than me and a proper, responsible big brother. Always there for me, always looking out for me, always on my back – a bit like a third parent. And me Ma would probably say I needed one because I am a bit of a one. A tyke. A prankster. A pain in the ...

Well anyway, Golden Boy had been betrothed to Mary before she left the village. It's a serious thing, betrothal. And Joe was really chuffed. He should have been, because, I mean, I really like our Joe and all that, but he was punching a bit above his weight. I remember the day she said yes. He looked like someone had stuck a lamp behind his face – he glowed with happiness. And well, I could understand why he might not want to wait to be with her.

Except that wouldn't be the sort of thing our Joe would do.

Except, he told me, it wasn't his baby.

Oh man, I felt for him then. It's one thing to be in trouble with Ma for a bit of misbehaving. She would stop yelling eventually. But, poor Joe – did this mean Mary was with someone else? That would break his heart.

But even in his heartbreak and disgrace, he was a decent bloke. He wouldn't make things harder for her, no matter what she had done to him. He set about quietly breaking off the engagement. He looked sadder than I had ever seen him. The lamp behind his face had been snuffed out.

And then, one morning, he bounces into the kitchen as chipper as you like, like he hadn't a worry in the world. 'What's got into you?' we all demanded. He told us it was back on, the wedding. Mary was going to be his wife.

Well, Ma went daft again. But Joe was firm. He was going to marry Mary and that was all there was to it. He never told us what changed his mind, but there was no changing it back again. Before long, he and Mary were wed and off to Bethlehem for the census. They didn't come back for a few years. Probably making sure Ma had had time to calm down.

And, you know, that glow was back in Joe's face and never left him until his dying day. If he ever struggled, raising that lad that wasn't his own, you wouldn't know it. He loved him like his own.

I wonder how you think Joseph felt after he'd heard from Mary.

What do you think of his original decision to dismiss (divorce) Mary?

It was, after all, perfectly lawful and the normal way of responding in such matters. The OT definition of a righteous man is one who would not treat a pregnant fiancé unkindly, but nevertheless would not be able to proceed with marriage. Why did he decide to dismiss her 'quietly'?

What do you think this means in practice? What would have been the consequences for Mary?

What does that tell us about Joseph?

So, what made him change his mind?

Why do you think the angel told Joseph not to be afraid? Why is doing what God wants sometimes scary? How does God help us? Joseph was prepared to do the opposite of what the law and society expected. The visit from the angel forces Joseph to redefine what it means to be righteous: someone who cares for a child who is not his own, and protects the child and his mother throughout the dangers and challenges that lie ahead. What could make him do that?

The role of Joseph is often overlooked, but it is only through his willingness to be open to God that events unfold as they do. What might have happened if Joseph had refused to listen to the angel? Refused to change his mind?

After Joseph's appearance at the beginning of Matthew (and Luke), we hear very little else about him. But we can use our imaginations. As the following pictures come up on the screen, I invite you to ask yourself 'What does this picture show us about Joseph – as a person, as a father to Jesus? What was he prepared to do for his adopted son?' Maybe chat with the person next to you?

George Bernard Shaw once famously said 'Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.' He wasn't a Christian, yet he summed up a Christian truth. If Joseph had continued on the path he originally set out upon, the world would not have been redeemed in the way it has. In changing his mind, Joseph breaks with long-established traditions, yet he is willing to risk these in order to carry out the angel's commands.

Are there fixed assumptions in our lives that we need to reconsider? Are there innate prejudices or ways of doing things that we need to change? As we look forward to God's kingdom, are we ready to change whatever is necessary within ourselves in order to become true inhabitants of that kingdom?

On this last Sunday in Advent, I invite you to spend a few moments silently thinking about ways in which you are open to God – or perhaps ways in which you are not! And whether there is anything each of us needs to change.