

December 22nd 2013: An Upstanding Man : Matthew 1:18-25

It's interesting to note that when we sing the Christmas carols we sing about Jesus, which you would expect, and often about the angels, shepherds wise men, Mary, but hardly ever about Joseph. Yet the part Joseph played in the story of the nativity was extremely important.

Indeed, when God picked Joseph to be the earthly father of His son, He chose really well. He chose a man who was just right for the task before him.

From the Scriptures we are given no idea of Joseph's age at that time, and people today still place him from as young as a 19 year old teenager to a quite an old man. There is even a tradition that Joseph was 93 when he married Mary, and that she was just 15.

Whatever his age though it is his character that shines out in the Christmas story as a strong example of what every Christian man should aim for. And one of the immediate things that is obvious about Joseph is that he was solid.

Solid in his Faith: Raised a Jew he was known as a righteous man even before the angel appeared to him, and that term suggests that he was known as someone whose beliefs affected the way he lived. Joseph was no hypocrite. He did not worship on the Sabbath and then act mean, nasty and devious towards all and sundry for the rest of the week. He was solid, upright, dependable.

He was also faithful in fulfilling the requirements of his religion, having Jesus circumcised on the 8th day and then, just over a month later, taking him and Mary to the Temple where he offered the dedication offering for their child. We also read in Luke's Gospel that when they took Jesus as a 12 year old to the Temple it was a practice they followed every year.

Now in all this he was probably not very different to many of his peers but the point is that he was solid in his faith in God and God was able to use him because of that. And there is still a real need today for Christian men to be solid in their faith and to want their belief system to be obvious in their daily living. Like a Christian police sergeant I know who keeps a Bible in clear view on his desk at work. It makes a statement about the importance of his belief to him but it also makes him available for God to use him in his workplace.

He was solid in his thinking process: Look with me at Matthew 1:19-20

Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man, and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

The suggestion here is of a man who thought things through before he acted. He didn't speak first and then think after. He didn't act on an impulse and then regret his words or action later. I know Christians who are like that and who defends themselves by saying, well that's just who I am. And it may well be, but it's not who God wants them to be. Well Joseph wasn't like that.

He could so easily have reacted angrily and without much thought when it was found that Mary was pregnant, but that wasn't his way. He thought it through till he came to a decision, but even then he kept on considering the matter. He was solid in the way he thought things through. I think of what James says in James 1:19 when I think of Joseph.

My dear brothers, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

That doesn't mean that Joseph was wishy washy in his decision making. When Joseph was sure about what to do he was very decisive in doing it. So when the angel told him to take Mary into his home as his wife, he did so. When the angel told him in a dream to leave Bethlehem because his family were in danger, he woke up and left for Egypt immediately, while it was still night.

So when Joseph knew what God wanted him to do he did it straight away, and that is something else that Christian men need to emulate more and more today.

He was solid in his duty to Mary: To be pledged in marriage to someone in those days was much more binding than an engagement is today. Someone described it as rather like a marriage without the sexual part. For a period of time prior to the marriage day which was when the husband took his wife into his or his parents home, you were fully committed to each other to the extent that any other close relationship with someone of the opposite sex was forbidden. The bond between you was so close that it required a written certificate of divorce to break it. And if the woman got pregnant during that period immense shame fell upon them both, and if it was apparent that the woman had slept with another, then she could even be stoned to death.

When Joseph discovered Mary's pregnancy and knew that he was not the father he immediately realized that the marriage must not take place. He was obligated to divorce her and there were two ways he could do that. He could do so publicly by taking Mary to the city gate and declaring in front of a Judge that he was divorcing her and why. A very public act that would have been extremely hurtful to Mary but would have protected his own reputation.

Or the other way was to take the papers to a priest or judge who had the reputation of being discrete, and to lodge them privately. Then he and Mary would go their separate ways and to a certain extent Mary would have been kept from public shaming and outrage.

At that point he believed that Mary had wronged him, but rather than treat her as badly as he felt she had treated him, he was prepared it seemed to be kind to her and forgiving. To care for her in some way for such was his duty before God.

He was solid in his general behavior in the sense that he was dependable: This becomes most apparent after his decision to take Mary home to be his wife. He was dependable in that he honoured her virginity right up till Jesus had been born. He looked after her on that arduous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem when she was so close to having the baby. Somehow he obtained the use of a stable as a birthing suite when there was no other place to stay, and he provided a house and income in Bethlehem for some months after the birth.

Then when the baby was in danger it was Joseph who had to take the family to Egypt and establish them there. And when the time was right it was Joseph who led the family back to Nazareth and re-established them once more in their home town. Joseph comes across as Mr Dependable. Mr fix it.

The problem sometimes however, with someone who is Solid and Dependable is that they can also tend to be quite conservative in their ways. Resistant to change. A little stubborn perhaps. Not highly adventurous and not very open to new ways...new voices....even the voice of God.

But Joseph wasn't like that, or if he was, God changed him. For the other obvious thing about Joseph is that he was **OPEN to God's leading.**

The interesting thing for me in the Christmas story is that the Angel of the Lord appeared more times to Joseph than to anyone else and always in a dream.

He appeared once to Zechariah in the Temple, face to face.

Once to Mary in her house, face to face.

Once to the Shepherds out there in the fields, face to face.

Four times to Joseph in four dreams! It might have been because his name was Joseph. There was a famous Joseph in the OT and he had a lot of dreams too.

It could have been because in his dreams Joseph didn't have the opportunity to argue the logic of the situation with the angel or to say no.

Whatever the reason the Angel used a dream to tell Joseph to go ahead and take Mary as his wife, and we are told that as soon as he woke up he did just that. He obeyed the angels command.

The angel used another dream to tell Joseph to get up and flee with his family to Egypt, and Joseph did not hang around for daylight but left the house that very moment.

He was nicely established in Egypt when he had the third dream mentioned in Matt 2:19-20 when the angel told him to return to his own country, and once again Joseph did not hesitate but pulled up his roots and headed back to Judea.

Then a little later when he was fearful about the political happenings in Judea, he heard from the angel in yet another dream and once again followed the directions he was given and headed to Nazareth.

Jesus was born of a virgin in Bethlehem and he grew up in Nazareth and was called a Nazarene, and in each case such was prophesized about Him in the OT. And because Joseph was open to God's call upon his life, he had a part to play in all those things.

Surely that is the great challenge Joseph brings to us this Christmas season. To be open to God's call because He will use you to fulfill His plans and purposes for this world.

He may well ask you to act in a way that seems really foreign to your conservative disposition. To climb the mountains that you would prefer to walk around. To go out of your comfort zone and risk the disdain of others to do His will.

He might speak to you in a dream, or send an angel in human guise, or challenge you through His Word or through His servants. If you are willing He will stretch you, use you, fulfill you.

As we face the beginning of a new year God expects much from us all. Are you prepared to pray

with Samuel: Master speak your servant is listening.

With Isaiah: Here I am send me

With Mary: Lord I am your servant. Work through me as you desire.