

Sermon 4th Sunday of Advent, Yr. A @ St Johns – 18/12/16

“Joseph and his adopted child” (Matthew 1:18-25)

Pastor André Meyer

Text... Pray: Heavenly Father, open our hearts today to your Word, in Jesus' name, Amen.

When I meet with couples who want to baptise their child I ask them about godparents: whom they have chosen and why. I ask, “*If you died suddenly, who would take responsibility for your child’s nurture in the faith? Who will raise your child if you’re not around?*” They’re important questions to ask any couple because of the uncertainties of life. Basically, “*Whom do you trust to raise your child?*” ...God the Father also had to answer the same question as He was about to give His only Son into human hands. God had to choose both a mother *and* a step-father to care for His very precious and vulnerable Son.

But what a scandalous situation for poor Joseph! How would he have felt at Mary’s news that she was pregnant? They’d not even slept together – and nor would they until married! Yet, his fiancé was with a child conceived out of wedlock. It was a sentence of shame *already*, regardless of what happened next. If he got out of the relationship, he would’ve been ridiculed as inadequate to hold the ‘attentions’ of his wife to be. If he stayed with her he’d have to wear whatever disgrace was thrown at them from their families. In fact, they would be shamed by the whole Jewish community. So, no matter what happened, they faced a life of condemnation for them both; ridicule and rejection by the community, their families, and also by extension, God. Why? For it was *His* laws that had been broken.

Joseph had to face the fact that the woman he loved and was pledged to marry, would bear him an *illegitimate* child. At best, he would be a step-father, a man gossiped about for the rest of his life if he married Mary now. “*Who was the real father who’d disgraced and ruined their futures in one fell swoop? Surely Mary was lying when she said it was God’s child! How could he trust her word now?*”

The reality is that many families, if they look back in their histories, have stories of an illegitimate child or adoption *somewhere* along the line. It’s not something that people typically shout from the rooftops. I have it in my own family. My father’s father was an illegitimate child who was conceived from an extramarital affair and born out of wedlock. In her indiscretion my great grandmother was shamed by her family and the community but still she bore a son, Kurt, who took on his mother’s surname – Meyer. I don’t particularly feel any shame, but others have looked down upon my parents over the years. Then, not long after my own father was born, he lost his father in the German front in WW2 in Russia. When he was 12 his

mother remarried and so Dad had a stepfather in his teenaged years, and then was later adopted into his uncle's home as a young man.

Then there is Mum's side. Because of the war my mother also lost her father when she was very young. A few years later her mother remarried, then tragically she died soon after as well. So my mother *also* had a step-father, and as an only child, was adopted into a step-family. Sadly, as it was, they didn't treat her very well at all. In fact, it was so bad for her that her widowed grandmother took her in and treated her as she ought to have been as a young girl. So, my parents have *both* experienced something of illegitimacy, adoption, stepparents and step-families and some of the many struggles therein. No wonder, after meeting in West Germany in the 1960's that they wanted to start a new life for themselves in Australia – on the *other side* of the world! Those difficult situations, not of their choosing, brought shame and hurt into their lives and were born out of a war-torn and shattered Germany. I am sure that some of you and your families may share similar stories. As their eldest, I know that my parents sadly still bear the scars of the shame that was imposed upon them in those early years. And yet, God has blessed them with a new life with new people to call family, here in this country.

What I'm reminded of when I think about these things is that God sees and knows what happens to us all. He sees *all* things – our good deeds and our bad; and He sees all the injustices that have been forced upon people. And because He knows, He cares for them; for He cares *for us*. In fact, God promises that *He, Himself* will look after all who are orphaned or shamed in some way, and He will be their defence. In Psalm 68 we hear: *"Sing to God, sing praise to His name, extol Him who rides on the clouds – His name is the LORD – and rejoice before Him. A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families..."* (Ps. 68:4-6).

If you or your family have been treated badly as illegitimate, as adopted or as step-family, then even though you are justified in being upset, remember this... Leave room for God to deal in His own way with those who have mistreated you. God will one day right what is wrong. St Paul says: *"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord"* (Rom. 12:19). So, let God deal justly with those who have done *you* wrong in *His* own powerful and righteous way.

Now, we hear from Matthew that Joseph was a righteous and just man (v.19). He was obedient to God's laws and ways and had integrity both before God and the community. But this news from his beloved Mary would surely have broken him. *An illegitimate child? What could he do?*

The law from Deuteronomy clearly stated that divorce was required in cases of adultery. Furthermore, an engaged woman found guilty of adultery was to be stoned to death *along* with her lover (Dt. 22:20–24). A man could also divorce his wife without stating any cause, simply by giving her a written certificate that would allow her to marry again (Dt. 24:1–4). Often, though, this would be done heartlessly for a husband’s selfish reasons. In Joseph’s case, he decided to divorce Mary quietly. But instead of selfishly, he meant to use the Law of Moses mercifully for Mary’s sake, likely because he both loved her and respected God. In fact, in their patriarchal society the law of divorce was always intended to protect the woman, since without a certificate of divorce and the opportunity to remarry she might simply be abandoned and left without *any* home or support.

Joseph, as a just and God-fearing man, had chosen the more merciful path in the face of a blow that would have shaken any man to the core of his being. It’s one thing to be morally in the right, but much harder to forgive someone in the face of such hurt, *and then*, to not seek revenge or retribution. Joseph respected both Mary and God and sought to do what was best by divorcing Mary quietly.

But Joseph has a change of heart. God, so often as He does, intervened at *just* the right moment and *with just* the right message. God intervened with a message of Good News! Joseph is visited by an angel in a dream and told to take Mary as his wife for her child is no ordinary child: He is the One who was promised long ago, who would redeem God’s people. Joseph was chosen *not* to be the biological father but instead to be this child’s legal and adopted father. His legal and God-given right to be the father to Mary’s child and God’s Son would be sealed when he named the boy, ‘Jesus’ (v.25).

No doubt, much to Mary’s surprise the next day, Joseph immediately takes her into his home as his wife. What a turn of the tables, what a gift that he gives to her for it could have gone very differently! Joseph *welcomes* Mary into his life – despite the possible pain and shame that could result from those around them. God graciously intervened so that He could use Joseph in a very important way in the life of His very own Son. For God had *everyone’s* best interests at heart. God called Joseph to welcome Mary and her child and to not be afraid of what might happen. And through Joseph God would provide a home – a ‘*stable life*’ – for both Mary *and* God’s precious Son. This Joseph did to the glory and praise of God.

God used Joseph, despite the apparent sin done against him, and changed his mind with a life-changing word of Good News. That Good News brought a new perspective into his life so that he could open his heart and his home in a very special and God-ordained way.

And this is something that God wants to use *us* for as well. For God graciously welcomes us – despite our wrongs or our sins that we do to Him and one another. He helps to free us from them and offers us a new start and a new family to live within – His home of mercy and peace bought by the precious blood of His dear Son. Why? To keep that blessing to ourselves? Yes, I guess if we want to. But No. God can use it to *do so much more!*

Let God's welcome of Joseph, let Joseph's welcome of Mary and the baby, and let Mary's welcome of Jesus be a reminder of the power of welcoming and giving the gift of mercy to others especially in this Christmas season. I mean, aren't we all *illegitimate children* when it comes to our broken relationship with God? And aren't we *all* adopted sons and daughters that God has brought into His family through His 'legitimate' Son's death on the Cross?

So perhaps you might 'adopt' someone into your lives or homes or invite them over for a Christmas meal – for so many live without such love. Let us give our welcome and share God's love through a small message, a Christmas card, a gift, a conversation, a short personal phone call, or a visit to someone this week. So, as Mary and Joseph welcomed each other and the unborn child in difficult circumstances, may we let God use our appreciation for His welcome of us, to offer kindness to another. Let us offer that welcome that they may give thanks and welcome the Saviour into their hearts as well. Amen.

And the peace of God which passes all human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.