

Matthew 1:18-25 Thursday 19th March 2020 Midweek Service
Revd Ruth Cartwright

We'll start with a brief prayer:

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus did not come from an ordinary family. At the time of his conception his mother, Mary, was betrothed to Joseph, but she was not a married woman. Betrothal was more than just engagement, but Mary and Joseph would not have slept together, so Joseph knew when Mary became pregnant that the baby was not his. The law as stated in the books of scripture and explained in the synagogue would have dictated that Joseph cast Mary aside and have nothing more to do with her. She would probably have been thrown out by her family as well, so her situation would have been desperate. It is possible that both Mary and her unborn baby would have died, but those were the rules.

Joseph appears to have had a deep faith and wasn't just bound by the customs of his time - he listened when the angel came to him and weighed up what he said. He believed the angel and Mary that this baby was from the Holy Spirit, so he went beyond the rules and supported his betrothed as the pregnancy continued. He could have just settled for what the law dictated – it would have been much simpler for him; he would then have judged Mary, condemned her, moved on with his life, and nobody would have thought any the worse of him.

When we are negotiating our way through relationships and human dilemmas, it is often more straightforward to be able to refer to a law or set of rules, get things in black and white, and make a judgment or decision accordingly. Life in our times is often chaotic and there's a sense of anything goes morally or ethically which can be difficult for us as Christians. When there is a moral issue or dilemma and we are wondering what we should think, how we should react, it would be great if we could just look to the Bible, to the words of Jesus, and to our priests, and be told exactly what to do in every situation. But that isn't the case – we have to pray and think these things out for ourselves with God's guidance.

Our society is big on judging and condemning people, whether it's because they have too much cellulite, or they are single parents, or they are not able to work. But as thoughtful Christians, we have to look deeper as Joseph did with Mary and not rush to judgement. People often make bad decisions – we've all probably made a few. Are we really in a position to judge others and share in society's condemnation of the undeserving poor, those who have to use foodbanks, those who break the law, those who just struggle with day to day life in a society which is all about what you have rather than what sort of person you are?

As Christians we know we were created by God and that he has a plan for each one of us. We know that everyone has the potential to be the fantastic person God made them to be, but that some people have for a variety of reasons been unable to fulfil that potential. Does that stop God loving them and trying with them? No. So we should not be judging and giving up on

people either. Of course bad and harmful behaviour has to be dealt with and tackled, but underlying all our attitudes should be love, love that comes from the knowledge that every one of us has done wrong; we are all unworthy, but God loved us so much he gave his Son to die for us.

We don't have the benefit of an angel as Joseph did to point us in the direction of tolerance and acceptance and to show us precisely what God's plan is. But we do have the example of Jesus himself. He didn't have much time for the rules, but he did have a great deal of time for the outcast, for those whom society had rejected and regarded as worthless. He *specialised* in mixing with the unpopular and the unloved, he spoke up for them, and he brought in a kingdom where virtue does not depend on wealth and status, but all are loved equally.

Joseph had a challenge here. He had to look beyond the obvious assumption when Mary was pregnant that she had been with someone else; he had to look beyond the obvious course of action which would have been to cast her off; he had to listen to what the angel said and go against his instincts and all he had been taught in order to follow God and be obedient to him. What if he hadn't done this? I'm sure God would still have worked things out, but this was the best plan. So Joseph faced the challenge and did God's will. And we may be called upon to do this too, to forgive, to make allowances, to show care and concern for people that others think should be shunned, to go against what everyone else thinks we should do.

Let's pray for help to meet these challenges:

Dear Lord, we thank you for Jesus and for Mary and Joseph who were so brave. We pray that when we face challenges we may be guided by you and your command to show love to all. We pray that you will build us up as a church family and equip us for whatever you want us to do and wherever you want us to go in the future. Amen

Intercessions Thursday 19th March 2020 Midweek Service

Let us quieten ourselves to notice our God here with us now listening to our spoken and unspoken needs.

Lord, we long for our church to be alive and active, listening to you, and ready to go wherever you suggest. Show us how you see the work of the church and develop our will to work with you.

Silence

Response We call on your name, O God, to restore and revive us.

Lord, we long for your kingdom to come into our world and to flood it with truth and love, so the disillusion, hopelessness and sorrow which traps the human spirit and chokes its potential joy will disappear.

Silence

Response We call on your name, O God, to restore and revive us.

Lord, come into the daily relationships we so easily take for granted, and enable us to value one another, delighting in one another's qualities and responding to one another's needs with love.

Silence

Response We call on your name, O God, to restore and revive us.

Lord, you know the needs and pain of those we worry about. As you look after them, give them a sense of your caring presence to sustain and uphold them. We pray especially for anyone affected by coronavirus whether that be through illness, fear, and changes to everyday life. We also remember (prayer list and silence for people's own prayers)

Response *Silence*

We call on your name, O God, to restore and revive us.

Lord for us death can seem so cruel. Give us a better understanding of eternity and gather into your kingdom all those whose earthly journey has come to an end. We remember especially the family and friends of (list)

Silence

Response We call on your name, O God, to restore and revive us.

Thank you, Lord of hope, for the way you gave Joseph strength to do your will. We pray that we too may have strength to do the right thing as we seek to follow you.

Response Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of you Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen