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We've had our four young grandchildren staying with us over some of the Christmas period and it's been an absolute joy, we've been truly blessed. I've enjoyed being involved in their excitement, their boundless energy and enthusiasm for all things to do with Christmas - magical. However one forgets how incredibly demanding they can be, so tiring to the mind and body, but we still love them dearly! We took two of the girls to our crib service, they came dressed as angels - so appropriate; I dressed up to be like Joseph. However I was told I looked like a 'baddy' from Star Wars, explains why most of the children gave me strange looks during the service!

The central characters in our gospel story this morning, including the baby Jesus lying in the manger of course, are those ecstatic shepherds. They are proclaiming the good news to all and sundry, along with some thoughts from Mary. But what about Joseph, he's very much in the background, as most fathers are when it comes to newly born babies! The Bible doesn't say very much about Joseph, and yet there is much we do know about him, and much more which is supposition. Joseph doesn't say a single word in the Gospels but he certainly listens and obeys, and we can assume his words are recorded, because we can imagine the conversations he had with the angel of the Lord, Mary and later with Jesus. In fact he's visited by the angel on 4 separate occasions, which indicates he's under the guidance of Jesus' true father, Almighty God. He's been handpicked by God to be the foster father of Jesus, the 'Messiah', the promised one, and that makes must make him very special.

However I do believe Joseph has much to tell us today how important the role of Father plays in bringing up a stable family. It's widely thought he was much older than Mary, who could have been as young as 13. When Jesus began his ministry at around the age of 30, Mary appears alone, and although the gospels don't say she's a widow, we can probably assume she was and that Joseph had died.

Back to the beginning of the gospel story, dear Joseph thought his life was pretty well planned. He has a beautiful bride-to-be and a vocation all arranged neatly for him, but then his world comes crashing down around him. He discovers his beloved Mary is pregnant, and certainly not by him, he suffers in silence, how many men would, not many? There's no outburst or rebellion to cover up his inner pain, he could have her publicly disgraced or even stoned to death for adultery, if he wants, but no, he's a man of integrity and wants to do the right thing in the right way, and considers divorcing her without calling attention to the reason, because he loves her dearly.

When our lives take a turn for the worse, we too can cry out as Joseph must surely have done, 'God how can this be?' We may never understand what God our Father is doing this side of heaven, but asks us simply to trust in him, and all things will work together for good. In Joseph's case, there is some urgency because of the situation. In Matthew, we hear of the angel of the Lord explaining the miraculous conception to Joseph in a dream, and his responsibilities, he obeys. Although he is a direct descendant from David, we can easily picture him as a humble man, who keeps the laws of Judaism and is well respected in society. A man of meagre means, but none the less, an honorable and faithful man, a skilled carpenter, a simple man who trusts and obeys his God. What's more he's available when needed, willing to endure hardship and disappointment, qualities needed as a father. Looking forward to fathering his own child, as most fathers do, he's faced with being a 'step-father' to the Messiah no less.

Joseph accepts the revealed will of God and follows the instructions, journeying with the heavily pregnant Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem. He cannot afford a horse, only a donkey, can't get a room, only a cattle stall. He may think himself a failure as a provider, as many men feel today if they can't afford to give their families 'the best'. We can instead picture Joseph standing in the background in awe and amazement, as those ecstatic shepherds praise God for the birth of the promised Messiah. It's his accepted duty to become the father to the Messiah, who will teach mankind all about the acceptance and grace of God. Joseph is charged with naming this newborn and so defining this baby's mission, Jesus, meaning Saviour, saviour of the world. As the legal father he's responsible for the safety and protection of his family, and he takes these responsibilities very seriously indeed; illustrated by adhering to the angel of the Lord's warning to escape from Herod. They all flee to Egypt and safety, before eventually returning to the city of Nazareth and making a home there.

Joseph spends time teaching Jesus the intricacies of carpentry as well as providing spiritual training, as any good father should do. Joseph's influence over the young Jesus, during those unrecorded early years, must have left a lasting, loving impression, along with the deep love of Mary.

When Jesus spoke of God as being like a loving father, he could draw from his youth the kind of love he received from Joseph; this man of faith who stands as a testimony to the value of integrity, obedience, faithfulness, and especially to honouring the entrusted role of fatherhood - a righteous man.

There's a lot I'd like to know about Joseph, where and when he was born, how he spent his days, what he had to say, when and how he died. He may have thought that being righteous involved doing the right thing; he found out that it's also about being the right person!

Let us pray: *Lord God, when we observe the action of this mature, responsible man; when we study his disciplined restraint, his plain obedience, woven together into righteous action, we know that we too can live in accordance with your will for our lives*