

Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

Loving God

Open the Scriptures to us in a fresh and exciting way.

In Jesus name we ask it.

Amen

The unsung hero of Christmas is Joseph. There are carols about Mary, the shepherds, the wise men, the baby, the star, the angels, the animals. Even characters that aren't in the Bible we happily sing about: the donkey, the holly and the ivy, three boats that come sailing in, and Snoopy, but poor old Joseph misses out. Even if you can think of a carol that mentions him, it certainly isn't in the Top Ten. But the exclusion doesn't stop there. Have a look around. We have lots of wonderful stained-glass windows here, there's Peter, Mary, another Mary, old St Peter's, shepherds, Jesus, of course, lambs and angels, but Joseph is nowhere to be found. Not one window features Joseph. I can't even think of one Anglican church named after him. Anglicans have tried for some reason I don't understand to expunge him from our minds.

But today's Gospel has him right at the very center. Matthew, the gospel writer, gives us this section of his gospel from Joseph's point of view. He is anxious to avoid a marriage that seems compromised from the start, yet unwilling to make trouble for Mary. A dream settles his fears, so that he, a son of David, marries Mary and gives his name and family line to the new child. Legally he becomes the father of Jesus. He gives his son the name Jesus as the Holy Spirit said to. He protects mother and child through the many hazards that are ahead, including fleeing to Egypt as refugees. He teaches Jesus his trade and helps launch his public ministry. The wonderful personality that Jesus shows in the Gospels later on you can guarantee that he got a lot of it from the guidance and encouragement of Joseph. In short, the Gospel shows us St Joseph as strong, loving and wise.

The big revolution that Jesus brings to faith is the understanding that we have a loving and caring God. Before Jesus came, the Jews spoke of God, well they didn't speak of God at all, God was too holy, too sacred, even to use God's name was too dangerous. If they did speak of God, it was as the Sovereign of the Universe – distant, scary, unapproachable. Jesus, in sharp contrast, teaches us that God is intimately close to us. The prayer he teaches us, the Lord's Prayer, begins not "Our Father" but in the Aramaic that Jesus spoke it begins *Abba*, "Our Daddy". Where could he have learned to trust his Heavenly Father so much as to call him daddy? You guessed it, he learned it in the trust and the love he had for his earthly father, Joseph.

All of us are first loved by our earthly parents, hopefully. Because of this it becomes so much easier to love our heavenly God, our *abba*, our daddy. We learn first to love and trust in our human relationships. It is later that we see God at work in them.

Tradition has it that Joseph is a lot older than Mary possibly because he gets no mention once Jesus is an adult, suggesting that he may have died. But there is no reason to think that he is really old. Rather I like to think of him in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth, full of life, handing on what it means to be a strong, loving, and wise man.

Men in our society need lots of encouragement to be faithful to their wives and to acknowledge their spiritual selves. Sadly, one third of New Zealand children grow up without a father. I think men bring something wonderful to the raising of children. It's not just women's work. Our churches are not filled with men like Joseph waiting on the Holy Spirit and God's guidance for their lives. Rather faith is often seen as women's work.

The statistics go further: people with fathers who attend Church are much more likely to have Christian faith. I'm sure many of us here have had a dad or a grandad or an uncle who encouraged us on the journey of faith.

Maybe something of the answer to this is to reclaim Joseph, to name him as a role model of a faithful spouse and nurturer of the child Jesus. A takeaway for this week, might be to encourage a father you know. Tell them when they do a good job. And those of us with children of our own, let's invest time with them, the gift of our presence rather than the gift of presents this Christmas.

Eileen Duggan, a New Zealand poet writes this of St Joseph:

We could not love you better had you lived here,
and had a quarter acre in the north,
doing piece work with saw and nails and hammer
till Caesar bade you forth.

You might have come from Temuka for the counting,
along the hot dust-deep December road,
sighing for Mary in the saddle near you,
short-breathing with her load.

A tall, grave, country workman in the city,
answering questions with an absent nod,
and puzzled by some power, some dignity about him-
protector of a God.

You might have made your way out to Kaiapoi,
and stumbled on some open cattle shed,
half-thankful, half-ashamed, to lead her to it,
to rest her weary head.

We could not love you better had we seen you
in your own province, planing on a board,
and droning tender lullabies at twilight unto a sleepy Lord.

Pause

Strong, loving, and wise, Joseph was a role model for Jesus and is a role model for us.