

Playgroup Christmas
Mt 1:18-25
Tim Anderson 10/12/17

Holy Trinity Hasting is not the only Holy Trinity out there.
Our namesake Holy Trinity Adelaide had a cheeky billboard up
outside their church last Christmas.

The picture is of a modern cartoon style Joseph and a very pregnant Mary
with the caption,

"You're engaged.

Your fiancée is pregnant.

And you're not the father.

What a Christmas!"

They were looking for publicity and they got it.

Not only did they make the Adelaide Advertiser -

(Which would have been a great Christmas present for them)

but they also got reported in the London Daily telegraph.

(Not sure they will get many visitors from there at Christmas
but hey any publicity is good publicity.)

It seems like most people have done such a good job
of forgetting the Christmas story.

That when you remind them of the details,
they get shocked.

I hope you weren't shocked when we read Mt 1,
and you heard that Joseph's fiancée was pregnant and he wasn't the father.
Because we all know who the Father is.

But here's something that may be slightly shocking.

God does not have giving us a quiet life, high up on his list of priorities.

Joseph was a righteous man.

We don't use that word much today.

And if we do, we mean self righteous which is another thing all together.

But Joseph was a genuinely righteous man
which means he always strived to do the right thing in God's sight.
Righteous – do the right thing.

You might have excused him for thinking that because he was righteous,
God would make things work out well for him.

And the story starts well.

He's going to get married,

And his parents have arranged for him to marry a lovely young girl, Mary,
Who like Joseph has a deep love for the Lord in her heart.

Given that in those days you got no choice over who you married,
God was undoubtedly looking after righteous Joseph on this score.
Unfortunately, it's all downhill from there.

Now Joseph, because he's a righteous man,

He does the right thing by his wife to be,

And he's not going to take her to bed until they're married.

So you can imagine the nasty surprise he gets

When Mary tells him that she's having a baby.

'Well thanks very much, God.

Here I am,

Doing the right thing,

I'm saving it until we're married.

And what do you give me for my troubles?

A pregnant fiancée.

You haven't exactly rewarded my righteousness with an easy life.'

But Joseph really is a righteous man.

He doesn't only do the right thing when the chips are up.

He also does the right thing when the chips are down.

In first century Israel,

It was a public disgrace to be pregnant out of marriage.

The punishment on the books was that the woman be publicly stoned.

Now there's no evidence that this was put into practice at the time.

But never the less,
the community would have covered Mary's life in shame
had Joseph made her predicament public.
If he felt only slightly vindictive
at Mary going behind his back with someone else,
That option was open to him.
But righteous Joseph planned instead to divorce her quietly.
To break off the engagement,
A divorce was necessary,
Because engagement was a legally binding contract between two families.
So Joseph planned to do that quietly,
Perhaps to give Mary an opportunity to move to another town
where no one knew her
and start a new life.
You can imagine that it was not an easy decision for Joseph
to know what path to take.
It would not have been without tears and regrets
about his difficult situation
That he came to a decision.

But it was only after he came to the decision
That God sent him an angel to tell him the real story.
That Mary had in fact not been playing around.
Think about it.
How much anguish and suffering could God have saved Joseph,
If he had sent him the angel before Mary told him the news.
They could have sat down and planned out what to do,
And God could have saved Joseph
the heartache and trouble of working out
How he was going to respond to Mary's unfaithfulness.
He could have saved him from feeling betrayed by Mary.
Was God unaware of the difficult position that he was putting Joseph in?

Absolutely not.

God knows everything.

He knew precisely the pain and suffering he would cause Joseph.

So why did he do it?

I mean there was no one else apart from God responsible for Mary's pregnancy.

There was no one else apart from God

responsible for the timing of God's communication with Joseph.

Why was God not more considerate of Joseph's feelings?

The only conclusion you can draw is

that God is not interested in making life easy for his people.

He doesn't want you to have a quiet life.

He wants you to have a life of service of him.

God wanted Joseph to agonise over what to do about Mary's pregnancy

So that he could make the right decision

not to expose her to public disgrace.

You can only see the true character of a person

when they are under pressure.

God was entrusting Joseph with a big responsibility.

Joseph would be the earthly father of the Son of God.

So Joseph's character had to be refined in the fire of adversity.

So next time you wonder why God allows you to go through

all of the difficulties that beset your life,

be thankful

that God hasn't chosen you for a position of even greater responsibility.

Because if he had,

He may well have decided to refine your character with even greater trials.

“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.
She will give birth to a son,
And you are to give him the name Jesus,
Because he will save his people from their sins.”
From the moment he heard the words,
‘Joseph son of David,’
He would have known he was caught up in something of great importance.
Because of course he was not Joseph son of David,
He was Joseph son of Jacob.
David was actually 26 generations back in his family tree.
If you are caught up in something
that involves promises that God made to one of your ancestors 26
generations ago,
this is not some small matter.
Imagine if an angel appeared to you,
And indicated that you were to be the fulfilment
of a promise made to one of your forebears in the year 1100.
This is an event of global importance.
“Mary will give birth to a son,
And you are to give him the name Jesus,
Because he will save his people from their sins.”
This is the Christmas message in a nutshell.
His name is Jesus
Because he will save his people from their sins.
The name Jesus means ‘the Lord saves’.
It is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua.
Joshua was a famous leader of Israel,
So there were plenty of Jesuses floating around in first century Israel.
But throughout the Bible,
Whenever God specifies a name it’s because of what it means.
Jesus means ‘the Lord saves’.
But that immediately begs the questions,

The Lord saves from what?

If you'd asked an average first century Jew what they needed God to save them from,

The answer would have immediate –

From the national disgrace of having our nation ruled by Rome.

But the angel said call him Jesus

Because he will save his people not from Roman rule
but from their sins.

That's a crucial point.

"You will name him Jesus

because he will save his people from their sins."

If we don't get the right diagnosis,
we can't get the right treatment.

There might be any number of things you'd like to be saved from.

I'd like to be saved from getting cancer.

I'd like to be saved from all the forms you have to fill out these days.

I'd like to be saved from kids leaving their mess all over the house.

It must be the start of the school holidays.

But more than any of those,

I need to be saved from my sins.

The consequences of sin sickness are worse than any other disease.

But Praise God!

He has delivered me from the power and penalty of sin.

That's what the angel told Joseph.

"You will name him Jesus

because he will save his people from their sins."

Is that what you will celebrate this Christmas?

I get all kinds of funny comments from people at Christmas time.

People celebrate Christmas for all sorts of funny reasons.

"Oh, I love this time of year because it's such a happy time."

"I love the Christmas lights. I love the carols.

I love babies:
the baby Jesus makes me remember my own children
when they were babies.”

That’s nice.

But at the end of the day,
If you aren’t celebrating Jesus
because he will save his people from their sins,
You’ve missed the point of Christmas.

And let’s be honest,
Even if you believe it,
It’s hard to celebrate the real meaning of Christmas at Christmas time.

There will be people in your extended family,
People who you will be at a Christmas party with this year,
Who don’t believe that they need to be saved from their sins.

Imagine your family Christmas party.

One of your cousins is there and he proposes a toast.

“To a happy and prosperous 2018 for all here assembled!”

Everyone charges their glasses and drinks the toast.

So you get up and say,

“I’d like to propose another toast.

Let’s drink a toast to Jesus

Because he saves his people from their sins.”

I imagine that there would be many family Christmas parties

Where such a toast would not be greeted with universal acclaim.

The reason.

Not everyone believes that it’s true.

You might be one of the people who doesn't believe that it's true.

We have a number of newcomers with us today.

If you are one of those people,

can I say this to you?

The only reason
that people are still celebrating Christmas after 2017 years
is because many people have believed over the centuries,
that God did send Jesus to save his people from their sins.
Otherwise it's just not an important enough event
to be celebrated by so many people across the ages
and by people from every country on earth.
If you are here today and you've never really investigated
whether Jesus is the one God sent to save his people from their sins.
Then I have a little course
called Christianity Explored that I do with people.
We watch some video clips and chat about them.
It's my highest priority in life,
to help people come to understand who Jesus really is.
So if you are interested,
speak to me afterwards.
I would absolutely love to make a time to meet up with you
and do Christianity Explored together.

On the other hand,
you might be a person who knows in your heart who Jesus is.
But you still might find it very hard
to propose that toast at the family Christmas party.
If you went for a slightly more bland toast.
“Let’s drink a toast to Jesus,
He’s the reason for the season.”
You’d get away with that in many circles.
Though some would still have an issue.
But, “Let’s drink a toast to Jesus
Because he saves his people from their sins.”
Unless your gathering was made up just of Christians,
People would look at you a bit strangely.

In Australia we tend to operate at two levels.
There's the level of what you believe
And then there's the level of what you will talk about.
And we won't usually talk about a certain thing we believe
unless everyone present agrees.
We find it hard to talk about subjects that not everyone agrees on
without being offensive
so we choose not to talk about them at all.
And that makes it hard to celebrate the real meaning of Christmas.
Listen again to what the angel told Joseph,
"You will name him Jesus
because he will save his people from their sins."
That's who Joseph and Mary celebrated.
That's who the Shepherds and the wise men celebrated.
That's who we ought to be celebrating.
But we find it hard.
Can I encourage you?
If you know it's true,
be bold about putting the real meaning of Christmas
into your family celebration.
It's actually too important to gloss over,
even if it's a bit uncomfortable.

In a sense, our experience is not much different to Joseph's.
God didn't make life easy for Joseph.
He could have.
He could have let Joseph know
that the baby Mary was carrying was from the Holy Spirit,
before Joseph had to agonise about what to do about an unfaithful fiancé.
But God didn't do it that way.
He's not that interested in giving us an easy life.
He's interested in giving us opportunities to be faithful in serving him

despite the difficulties.

Joseph was faithful.

Verses 24-25 detail for us the extent of Joseph's faithfulness.

When Joseph woke up,

He did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him

And took Mary home as his wife.

But he had no union with her

Until she gave birth to a son.

And he gave him the name Jesus.

So Joseph was obedient to the letter.

You get the feeling that not only did he marry Mary

But he probably brought the wedding date forward.

And by bringing the wedding date forward

He was inviting all and sundry to speculate about the reason why.

And let me tell you,

They would not have been speculating

that the Holy Spirit had come upon Mary

And caused her to conceive.

Their speculation would have been to impugn Joseph's righteousness –

And nothing would hurt a righteous man more

Than having his righteousness called into question.

And Joseph went even further

than what we are told the angel commanded him.

He had no sexual union with her until the baby Jesus was born.

What could have been the reason for that?

Well there wasn't the same understanding

of the workings of the reproductive system in those days.

Joseph was probably making sure

that no one could say that this baby was in any sense biologically his.

Which is a pretty big sacrifice for a young man to make

Straight after he has been married.

Faithfully serving God was not the easiest thing for Joseph.

And it won't be for you and me.
But we choose to serve our Lord
Because the Lord Jesus is God with us – Immanuel
And he saves his people from their sins.
There's nothing more important than being saved from your sins.
It's so important that God sent his only son into the world
to make it possible.
It's something really worth celebrating this Christmas.
Something that's even worth shaping your life around.