

Sermon for Advent 4, Year A

Matthew 1:18-25

It has been said before that you can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family. There are some things in life that are simply decided for us. We are born with parents, we don't get to choose them, and our brothers and sisters, if we have any, come along that way as well, without any consultation with us. It is a great blessing when we have positive relationships with our parents and with our siblings, and also with those people in our extended family, but it's not always the case for everyone.

God decided whom Jesus would have as his earthly parents and it says something about the character of God when we look at the people he selected for this very important role. In response to the realization that she had been chosen to bear the Son of God, Mary reacted by singing for joy. At the heart of her joy was a sense of unworthiness—she knew she had done nothing to deserve this honour and rejoiced that God blessed her with this great gift.

But Joseph's side of the story tends to be overlooked. Joseph himself is often skipped over a bit in the story of Jesus' birth and yet God chose very carefully when selecting the man who would be known as Jesus' earthly father. Let's try to put ourselves in his shoes, particularly in light of the news that his betrothed is expecting a child – and it isn't his. Men, do you think you might be upset by the news that your wife-to-be has already become pregnant and that you are not the father? Ladies, if Joseph was your brother, who worked hard to make a living and always did the right thing, and you heard that this had happened to him, what do you think would be an appropriate response to this news?

We know that God greatly values the estate of marriage and he established laws to protect it. The sixth commandment is, '*Do not commit adultery*'. In fact, the Israelites' observance of this commandment and indeed all of the Ten Commandments was supposed to be part of their witness to the one true God. The idea was that when other nations who worshipped false gods would see the conduct of the Israelites, including their faithfulness in marriage, they would themselves want to seek out the true God, the God of Israel. On the other hand, when the Israelites failed to bear witness to God by flagrantly disregarding his commands they would tarnish God's reputation, leaving others to dismiss the Israelites and their God as being just like everybody else. For this reason, breaking some of the commandments could even result in the ultimate penalty – the penalty of death.

It's interesting that Joseph is referred to in the reading as a 'righteous man' or a 'just man'. What would his reaction be as a man of justice and righteousness when he had seemingly been betrayed by this woman? Maybe it depends on your definition of righteousness. Would righteous indignation be appropriate here—just like it was when Jesus later turned over the tables in the Temple in reaction to the unrighteous acts of those using it as a place of trade? How might righteous indignation be expressed in this case? Knowing the law and the options open to him, Joseph must have taken great time to consider how to respond to the obvious embarrassment of having a woman betrothed to him who had seemingly been unfaithful and who was pregnant.

So what is righteousness? How do we define it? Is it just about being good—doing the right thing? Upholding the law? Or does righteousness also include mercy—mercy for people who are unrighteous? The text says that Joseph was a righteous man and did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace, and so he had in mind to divorce her quietly. We know that Mary had done nothing wrong but Joseph was not yet privy to that information. Armed with the information he had, Joseph could have reacted to Mary's news with righteous judgment and condemnation—and many people would have understood his feelings and even approved of it.

Yet Joseph acted with *mercy* and showed himself to be a great man of faith. He seems to be a man who knows true righteousness and the God from whom it comes – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—a God who does judge and who does act with justice but who prefers to show mercy. He is a God who is slow to anger and who is abounding in steadfast love. He does hold people to account; in Advent we anticipate the time when Jesus will come again to judge the nations with *righteousness*. Yet, when we know what the word means, we know that his first preference as a righteous God is to forgive, to overlook, to show mercy to people and not expose them to public disgrace. That is his nature as a righteous God.

Can we say the same of ourselves? What is our nature? I'm not sure we can say that we always react mercifully when someone seemingly does wrong to us. I'm not sure that we naturally choose just to go about our business and quietly forget about it, when other people have sinned against us. There's quite often an urge within us to expose those who have wronged us and to make sure they get their just desserts. Whether it's from a sense of genuine justice, or just good old revenge, we all like to know that people who have done wrong are held to account, especially if we are the ones they have hurt, or if they have hurt other people we love. And yet righteousness itself does not demand that. Righteousness knows right from wrong but it is still guided by mercy.

What effect did it have on Jesus to have an earthly father who knew the righteousness of God? We know that Jesus, as a grown man, would encounter teachers of the law who dragged out a woman caught in adultery to test if Jesus was willing to follow through on the law, that such a woman be put to death. This was, of course, a test by the Pharisees. Was Jesus really righteous, or not? Did he truly uphold justice or not? I don't know what was on Jesus' mind at the time of this test and I don't know how many other merciful acts his father Joseph modelled for him as he grew up, but Jesus' answer to the Pharisees sounds a bit like he's "a chip off the old block". Jesus said, "Whoever is without sin may cast the first stone." And when those accusing the woman had left, Jesus said to her, "Is there no one left to condemn you? Then neither do I condemn you. Go and leave your life of sin." Righteousness knows right from wrong; yet it is always guided powerfully by mercy.

And so the righteousness of Joseph was a remarkable reflection of the righteousness of God. He knows what is right; he knows what is just; and yet he prefers to show mercy rather than exposing people to public disgrace. And, of course, Joseph's faithfulness was vindicated when he discovered the incredible truth that Mary had not, in fact, been unfaithful; there was no other man and there had been no betrayal. Instead, God had given them the most extraordinary gift and honour—to be the earthly parents of Jesus, the Son of God. From what we know of Mary and Joseph, it seems like God chose very wisely indeed.

None of us are born righteous; and we can't earn it either. The whole point of Jesus coming was so that all people would be *declared righteous and made* righteous. Faith in him, trusting in his promises, credits our empty account with the righteousness that he gives us and that his sacrifice on the cross won for us. When we understand our own righteousness as a gift from God and not a badge of honour, then we too can live very much like Joseph – bringing glory to God by observing his laws; and sharing the love of his Son with others as we are guided by mercy. Amen.