

Trinity College Cambridge

19 January 2014

PEOPLE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

JOSEPH

Deuteronomy 10: 12–end Matthew 1: 18–end

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'Then Joseph her husband, being a just man' (Matthew 1.19)

Poor old Joseph! What has he done to deserve the decent obscurity into which we seem to have cast him? If Oscar Wilde's dictum has any merit – the one thing worse than bad publicity is no publicity at all – then Joseph's problem is surely pretty obvious: not a bad press, but almost no press at all. For isn't Joseph, at least as most of us I suspect think of him, the man all but irrelevant to the Christian story – a father who wasn't a real father at all, a man upstaged by the angelic experiences of his wife, a man of whom no saying is recorded at all in Scripture, a man who makes a brief appearance at the beginning of the gospels, and then disappears altogether, unlike Mary?

It's probably not very tactful for me, in Trinity Chapel, to suggest you should go to King's – but if you ever do go, look very carefully at the great sequence of stained glass windows that begins at the north-west corner of the Ante-Chapel, and works its way up the length of the Chapel, all round the east end and down to the opposite, south-west corner – a sequence in which the lower windows tell the New Testament story, and the upper windows, in a typical late-medieval typological arrangement, offer a variety of Old Testament parallels. And where, do you think, the New Testament story begins in this sequence? Not with the birth of Jesus, but with the birth and childhood of Mary. It takes no less than three of the whole sequence of twenty-four windows just to get us to the point where the story of Jesus himself begins. And in this pre-history of Jesus, the life of Mary, Joseph scarcely seems to feature. Unsurprisingly, given the nature of late medieval piety, Mary, the Queen of heaven, overshadows her husband completely. And early Christian tradition if anything added insult to injury, for though Joseph himself never appears in the Biblical witness after the brief account of Jesus's childhood in the Gospel of Luke, there are a few passing references to brothers of Jesus in the gospels and the book of Acts – but these were conventionally explained away as close companions or disciples, since the early tradition of Mary as ever-virgin ruled out the possibility that Joseph could have been a biological father of children by her. Whichever way you turn – and I am making no assumptions about the truth or otherwise of the early traditions that supplemented the Biblical text – Joseph was apparently written out of the script.

It is therefore something of a shock to turn to the opening of Matthew's Gospel, setting aside the image of the nativity plays, the synthesized Christmas story that my college probably more than any other has been responsible latterly for popularizing through the Christmas Eve services, setting all that aside, and to see how Matthew really begins his account of the life of Jesus. For there in fact it's Mary who's cast in the shade. The genealogy – three sets of fourteen generations – traced from Adam to Christ runs through the male line, and connects Joseph to Jesus, and back in time to David, and to Abraham. The angelic visitations in Matthew are all to Joseph. It is Joseph, the 'just man', who seems to be instrumental in all the decisions around Jesus's birth and childhood – Joseph 'did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife', Joseph 'got up and took the Child and His mother ... and left for Egypt', and it was Joseph who again got up and took his family back to Israel when it was safe so to do, and again Joseph who decided they would live in a city called Nazareth. If the visitations of the angel are powerful instances of the revelation of God's plan – as they surely must be interpreted – the authoritative revelation is, here, through Joseph, and he is, for the first two chapters of the Gospel, the principal actor in the sacred drama. And remember, once again, that in the traditional arrangement of the gospels, the gospel of Matthew comes first. Reading the New Testament in its traditional sequence, it's the Joseph perspective that establishes the initial framework of the narrative.

Why might Matthew's Gospel have put things this way? Was it an early example of misogyny or male chauvinism, a refusal to allow a woman's view to predominate? Was it that the gospel writer was embarrassed about the testimony of Mary, or did he not know about it? Obviously we shall never know for sure. "In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!" Thomas Gradgrind, the oppressive headmaster, opined in Dickens' novel *Hard Times*. If facts are what you are after – hard, historical data, backed up by independent, objective evidence – then there's precious little, almost nothing, to say about Joseph. He was a man; he had a name; he was probably a carpenter, if a later allusion in Matthew's Gospel is taken at face value (Matthew 13: 55); that's about it.

But all the same, the Gospel does have something important to say about Joseph, at least by implication. It's long been a common and superficial trick for those who want to show up the inconsistencies in Scripture to point out that Matthew and Luke both have different genealogies for Jesus. But the significant point is not so much that at least one of the genealogies must be wrong, but rather why the Gospel writers considered the genealogy of Jesus important. In Matthew's Gospel, the sequence takes us back through Joseph right to the foundation of Israel. And therefore – the crucial point – for the Gospel writer, Joseph was the connection pulling together Jesus and the whole history of God's chosen people, Israel. What is remarkable is that in the face of an overwhelmingly powerful cultural preoccupation with blood lines and legitimate inheritance, early Christianity persevered with this apparently peculiar combination of a virgin birth and a father who is counted as a real father despite the absence of blood connection. Joseph, for Matthew, is the conduit through which the history of Israel is joined to Jesus. And so, through him, the great panorama of Christian doctrine, as it appropriated the history of Israel, opens up – we reach, through him, back to exodus and exile and ultimately to creation itself.

This is not merely a transcription of ancient world patriarchy. Something else is going on. Joseph, Matthew tells us, was a just man, or it's sometimes translated as a 'righteous' man, and for that reason was unwilling to shame Mary when he found out she was pregnant by someone else. Two things are implicit in that description. The first is perhaps the most obvious – 'just' or 'righteous' here seems to imply 'merciful'. Joseph is entitled to shame Mary publicly, and have her stoned for adultery, but he chooses not to harm her. In this, he perhaps echoes the prophet Hosea – 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice' (Hosea 6: 6) – but he also anticipates Jesus's own commendation of compassion. And the second is that by all that an audience at the time would have understood as obedience to the Hebrew law, Joseph is deemed to be 'just', law-abiding, fulfilling the spirit of the law. That combination of law and compassion is precisely what we can discern in Deuteronomy, as in our first reading – 'And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord, to walk in all his ways...' and again 'The Lord executes justice for the fatherless and widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing'. (Deuteronomy 10: 12, 18)

Joseph, then, is a true Israelite, and in him, and therefore in his adopted son, Jesus, the history and standing of Israel is not rejected, as many Christians were later to assume, but actually fulfilled. It is precisely because Joseph is a just man, fulfilling the requirements of the law in spirit as well as in letter, that he is a suitable adoptive father for the Christ-child. That is the first of two crucial conclusions about Joseph we can draw from Matthew's Gospel.

The second follows from what Joseph has to do in response to God's intervention in history when the Holy Spirit impregnates Mary. He has to adjust and abandon not only the entitlement to public shame for Mary, but even his planned compassionate alternative. He has to accommodate something utterly outside the normal expectations and preoccupations of his own culture and class. His first-born will not be his own son as such – inheritance and blood-lines are overturned. His world is turned upside down. And yet, as Luke's Gospel tells us is also true of Mary, Joseph accepts what God is asking of him. Here, in Matthew, it is Joseph who is a pattern of true faith and obedience, who does not claim his entitlement, but accepts what comes to him from God, and in that acceptance something remarkable takes place – something beyond presumably what Joseph could ever have imagined. His obedience allows the possibility of a radical transformation in human destiny.

It's too easy sometimes to turn a saint into a handy accessory for contemporary ethics – Christopher for hospitality, Francis for eco-friendliness, and so on. But there is a moral in this story of Joseph, nonetheless. Both Joseph and Mary, in different ways, in different gospels, are held before us as templates of those who open themselves to the surprise of God. But they can't reach for it and grasp it, and take it for themselves as if it was a handy lifestyle choice. Their opportunity is their obedience – not a very fashionable idea, perhaps, but one central to Christian life. In Joseph, we see a man who fulfils the requirements of the law, and yet in the face of the extraordinary and impossible demand God places on him, cannot claim what is his apparently by right. He must renounce, accept, stand back, act on God's word and let be what will be.

In all this, Joseph paradoxically is a true disciple of Jesus as well as a true father or saint. We're deluged today with media messages urging us to adopt some lifestyle choice or other, as if we alone are the arbiters of our own destiny. Granted, there are good things in life to be enjoyed – all the same, the Christian way is not a way of grabbing and grasping, but of obeying and accepting. Joseph teaches us how to be just, and – hardly surprising, is it? – to be just in a Christian sense is not merely to adhere closely to a formal code of behaviour, but in compassion and in obedience to wait on God's word, and on God's will for us. Love is not compelled, but experienced and encountered. Faith is not simply a human wish-fulfilment, but a waiting on the grace that comes freely from God himself. God meets us in the midst of life's difficulties, and in those difficulties, if we trust what he will do with us, extraordinary things may happen. So I hold out a candle for Joseph as well as Mary, and for all those who humbly embrace whatever destiny God has laid out for them, in faith and in trust that he will work his will through them. To him, then, be all honour, glory, might and power, now and for ever. Amen.