

Home Group study: week beginning 29th November 2020

Against All Odds — Joseph

Can you think of anyone who plays a 'bit part' in a book, tv series, film, play etc?

What is that person's significance to the plot? Would you miss them if they were not there?

Read: Matthew 1: 18-24

Discovery

Sunday's sermon was the first in a new series leading up to Christmas. As Dave describes it in his letter to the Church in Shepperton of 29th November (not yet part of the canon of Scripture, as far as we know!): 'we look at key characters linked to the nativity and how they managed to deal with, and even thrive under, all manner of diverse pressures. We've entitled the series "Against All Odds" which draws attention to the huge challenges faced by our "nativity heroes".'

Of all the people in the Bible, Joseph and Mary are amongst the best known. It's a strange thing that the Christmas story is also probably the best-known Bible story, yet, as we know, Easter is much more significant. Perhaps you might like to talk about why this is.

When we look at what the Bible actually tells us about the famous Joseph, we find he's hardly mentioned. We know very little about him. This short passage in Matthew 1 is the most detailed reference we have to Joseph. Mark doesn't mention him at all, John just quotes two occasions where people refer to Jesus as Joseph's son and even Luke, whose Gospel account is considered the most detailed, mentions him mainly in incidents in Jesus's childhood where he's just part of the narrative. But Luke *does* reveal something very significant about Joseph, which we also learn from Matthew 1:20. Have a look at Luke 1: 27. What is the great significance in what Luke tells us here?

You probably know this already, but 'pledged to be married' (Matthew 1: 18) was a bit different from 'engagement' as we know it in our society. 'Pledged to be marriage' involved a commitment as strong as actually being married, such that the only way out of it was divorce. That's why Joseph can't just 'dump' her when he discovers that Mary is pregnant, but, as v19 tells us, 'he had in mind to divorce her'.

Tim gave us a very clear insight on Sunday into what this whole incident must have been like for Joseph. Discuss together how Joseph must have felt through all this: including his thoughts on staying with Mary after all.

Understanding

The usual, perhaps uninformed, view of Joseph is that he and Mary are Jesus's dad and mum. Throughout his ministry Jesus refers to God the Father as his father. Who is actually Jesus's father (v20)? What important aspect of God does that reveal? (*In case that question is not clear, it is an important demonstration of the fact that God is Three in One and tells us a lot about the Trinity.*)

Is it important that we understand that Joseph is not Jesus's father? If so, why?

Verse 22 tells us that 'all this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet'. There is an explicit reference to Micah 5: 2. But Joseph himself is an important part of fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies about Jesus. How does Joseph fulfil the scriptures? Does this imply that in some sense Joseph is actually Jesus's father? Can we see a parallel in Jesus being born of God and adopted by a man, and us being born of man and adopted by God? Take a moment to consider what it means to us to be adopted by God.

What sacrifices does Joseph make in order to obey the command of God given by the angel in v24? And what hardships will he suffer as a result of that agreement?

Application

The birth of a child is a wonderful and exciting thing, a cause of great celebration. Indeed Jesus's birth is still a cause for celebration even today: even if the way people celebrate is often quite inappropriate, on many levels! As Christians, how should we celebrate Christmas (and how *shouldn't* we celebrate Christmas!)?

Coming to faith in Christ is also a wonderful and exciting thing, a cause of great celebration. Joseph went through a lot of hardship though for his part in Jesus's birth; what hardships might we be called to endure for having come to faith in Jesus? Can those hardships outweigh the 'benefits' of faith?

Joseph could have avoided those hardships by divorcing Mary. He had every right to divorce her publicly and, as Tim pointed out on Sunday, cause her great disgrace. People in our generation are very quick to demand their rights. By definition our rights are our entitlement and should be protected and insisted upon. Do you agree?

What does Joseph's approach to his 'rights' in verse 19 teach us about how we as Christians should regard our rights?