



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Title: Peaceful Faithfulness: The Example of Joseph

Readings: *Isaiah 7.10-16; Psalm 80.1-8; Romans 1.1-7; Matthew 1.18-end*

Date: 21st December 2025

The Venerable Sue Lucas, the Archdeacon of Southend

Today, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we light the candle for the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus:

‘Though Mary was afraid, she responded to your call with joy,’ says one of the prayers set in Common Worship for the lighting of the fourth Advent Candle.

This year, however, as we read Matthew’s Gospel, the focus is indirectly on Mary, and more emphasis is placed on her husband, Joseph.

If we know very little about Mary, we know even less about Joseph! That doesn’t stop today’s Gospel being richly suggestive about how reflecting on him might encourage us in our own journey through this season of preparation – our Advent adventure, if you like!

First, we learn from today’s Gospel that he was kind and compassionate; Mary’s scandalous and unexpected pregnancy gave him the right, as her intended husband publicly to shame her. Even before the angelic visit, he responds differently, and proposes to deal with the situation quietly and privately - not subjecting her to public shame.

Now, one of our Diocesan values is kindness, mutual respect, gentleness and humility; In not standing on his rights here, Joseph shows all of these, but more: his kindness, compassion and humility are about a willingness to turn aside from the positional power he enjoyed in the service of love. ‘Justice is love distributed,’ wrote Joseph Fletcher, the twentieth century philosopher and ethicist.

It doesn’t take more than a moment of thought to realise that much of public life in our contemporary world is not structured by kindness, gentleness and mutual respect.

So if, in this season of preparation, we can practise intentionally showing kindness in thought, and word and deed; and to sit lightly to our power – this is, in a small yet perhaps significant way, quietly but insistently speaking up, with Joseph, for kindness in a public space which is often febrile, angry and unkind.

It doesn't stop there in the Gospel of course. Joseph's kindness extends to 'putting Mary aside quietly' – to quietly ending the betrothal.

At this point, Joseph falls asleep and dreams. Now, I sometimes think I have some of my best ideas when I'm asleep! Twice in St Matthew's Gospel, here, and when he is warned to flee with his little family to Egypt in the wake of Herod's wrath, God speaks to Joseph in his dreams. It's perhaps no accident that he has the name of that famous dreamer of the Hebrew Scriptures! The point though is that, in today's Gospel, a deeper kindness, a more radical compassion and humility come to Joseph from God while Joseph is sleeping.

There is a tradition in the Roman Catholic Church of devotion to 'Sleeping St Joseph.' The previous Pope, Pope Francis, kept a small statue of Sleeping St Joseph, and would apparently put prayers about particularly knotty problems beneath it.

What's perhaps behind this tradition is that, just as we need to practise kindness as a discipline – so, in our over-heated, febrile, over-busy world, in our tendency to see our worth in activity, we also need to practise rest as a spiritual discipline. Here, there is a touch point with another of our Diocesan values – sustaining healthy rhythms. None of us can keep going all the time, and nor do we give of our best when we do. We need at times to detach from all this and rest; 'God gives his beloved sleep,' says the Psalmist (Psalm 127). Further if we do keep relentlessly keeping on, it can become a kind of idolatry – of thinking we can accomplish it, when really, perhaps the important thing is to say our prayers, get enough sleep, and then do our best – and not to get in the way of the Holy Spirit! - 'it is in vain you rise up so early and go so late to rest,' says the same Psalm. Joseph's peaceful faithfulness to God, even in the most difficult of circumstances, shows us that God will accomplish it, even when we cannot see a way through.

Which brings us to another of our values: Faithful, courageous and open to the unexpected and surprising;

The theologian Jane Williams once said that we are so used to the extraordinary courage of the Virgin Mary's 'yes' to God, that we don't stop to speculate on whether others might have said no! After all, a call on her life in which, in the scandal of the manger and the scandal of the Cross, 'a sword will pierce her own heart,' might not be immediately appealing.

Today, in compassion, quiet faithfulness and rest, we hear also Joseph's 'yes,' which also makes space for the utterly surprising, unexpected gift of Immanuel, God with us; God's mercy, compassion and relentless love, shown not in power, but in weakness and humility;

The Advent Antiphon for today, 21st December, is O Oriens:

Morning Star, splendour of light eternal and Sun of righteousness;

Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

In the story of the utterly unexpected coming of the Bright Morning Star in the power of humility, Joseph's restful confidence in God has a part; can we learn from him to be shaped by kindness, and yes, by divinely given rest – that we may greet that Bright Morning Star with ready hearts. Amen.