

St Nicholas' Anglican Church, Mordialloc, Sunday 22nd December, 2019 (Advent 4)

Revd Dr Sharne Rolfe, Vicar

Readings:

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Sermon: A righteous man

One of the many joys of Scripture is the opportunity it affords us to get to know better the various characters that make up the great and broad canvass of the Old and New Testaments. In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we get to know a man called Joseph rather well. It may not be a particularly long, or detailed passage about him, but nonetheless it tells us a lot about this very kind, compassionate and righteous man.

The Gospel of Matthew tells the story of Jesus from a Jewish perspective, presenting Jesus as the fulfilment of OT prophecies (such as the one we heard in Isaiah today). The primary purpose of Matthew's Gospel is to present Jesus as the Messiah, and his teachings as the path that Judaism should follow. By beginning the Gospel with a record of Jesus' family tree (in the verses leading up to our reading today), Matthew links Jesus to the whole of OT history. And Joseph, the man to whom Mary is engaged, is an important part of that history.

Have you ever been in a situation that is incredibly complex and difficult, with no clear answers in regard to how you should move forward? This is precisely Joseph's situation as we enter the Scripture story today. He was a good and righteous man. He was betrothed to a virgin, and following Jewish custom was to marry her soon. But she has told him she is pregnant, and what a scandal that would have been at the time. A great deal was at stake for Joseph. Most certainly his reputation; most certainly Mary's. And perhaps even Mary's life - we know all too well from other Scripture stories the fate of women accused of adultery. So he had thought it through; he had

prayerfully discerned - and he had decided to do the righteous thing - dismiss her quietly. But, we are told, just when he had resolved to do this, he received a message from God, a message about God's plan for him, for Mary and indeed for the world. There was a lot riding on Joseph getting this right - just as there had been so very much riding on Mary also hearing rightly God's call on her life. And Joseph did heed God's call on his life, God's will. And he, like Mary, was obedient to this call. He took Mary as his wife, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Joseph not only tried to do what was right in his life; he also tried to do it the right way. When Mary told Joseph about her pregnancy, Joseph knew the child was not his. His respect for Mary's character and the explanation she gave him, as well as her attitude towards the expected child, must have made it hard to think his bride-to-be had done something wrong. Joseph had decided to break the engagement, but he was determined to do it in a way that would not bring public shame to Mary; he wanted to act with justice and love. At this point, God sent Joseph confirmation of Mary's story and the call to act in a way which was different to what he had previously discerned. God called him to take a great steep of trust and faith, and to take Mary as his wife.

It takes a lifetime of practice to be this attuned to God's will in our lives; and to be obedient to that will, no matter what the cost. God has a plan for each of us - and that plan is for us to become what it is that God wants us to be. For Mary it was to be the mother of God. For Joseph it was to be the earthly father of Jesus and a good, kind and compassionate husband to Mary. What is God's plan for you? If we are to know that plan, we need to connect to the desire that lies within us all to know God's will in our lives. That desire will help us with all the struggles, all the challenges, all the suffering that comes with the truly Christian life - from which will also flow the immeasurable riches, the indescribable joys, that are of the grace of God.

The child conceived was to be called Immanuel, God with us; Jesus, the Saviour. As we watch and wait for this soon-to-be, momentous Christmas event, the birth of Jesus, Immanuel, let us pray that we, like Mary and Joseph, will be blessed in our faith, our obedience, so that God's will for us will be fulfilled. Let us pray that we will be given the grace to do God's will in our life, and to be the bearers of the peace of Christ as a light in our lives to our world.

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.