
The Godfather

Matthew 1.18-25

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 19, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Some years ago I went for a long walk with a friend. She had a lot on her mind. She wanted to talk about her mentor, who'd also been her Ph.D. supervisor. My friend said, "She's been really kind to me over the years, introducing me to all the leading people in the field, getting me slots to present at conferences. But now, since her marriage broke up, she's become a bit strange. She's dressing as if she were my age, and she seems to want to get invited to all the events and parties I go to. She's always asking about my husband and the children. I'm beginning to find it a bit creepy."

I said, "It sounds to me like she wants to be you."

"What on earth do you mean?" my friend replied, incredulous. "She's quite famous, she's an established scholar – I'm just a minnow in the pond."

I had to stop my friend and look straight at her, because I realized what I was about to say was a lot for her to take in and involved unsettling a lot of her world. "Look at your life. You have beautiful children, a good husband, and a healthy career. Who cares who's published the best book on this and gets to be the keynote speaker at that? This woman doesn't care about those things deep down. She wants what you have, and in her misery she's somehow got it into her head that the closer she gets to you, emotionally and physically, the more she's going to become like you – maybe turn the clock back to when she had what you have." My friend was horrified. She said, "I've never realized people thought like that."

I responded, "That's because you're different from most people, especially most people around a competitive environment like a university. Your life isn't consumed by envy. A university is a huge chemical experiment in envy. Everybody's comparing themselves to each other all the time: everyone's constantly coveting the acclaim, or security, or recognition, or salary, or family life, or emotional balance, or office with windows, or title, or parking space, or annual research award, or promotion, or anything else that someone else has. You seem to be oblivious of all of that, and that makes this woman envy you all the more."

My friend was totally bewildered. "What can I do about it?" She asked.

I said, "Absolutely nothing."

I wonder which person in this story you most closely relate to. I wonder if you think I was exaggerating when I talked about envy. As a pastor I've come to think envy is the most widespread sin of all. Almost all of us look at one another and think, "If only I had her looks, or his brains, or her children, or his wife, or her job, or his house, or her poise, or his charm, or her courage, or his faith." Today's gospel invites us to read the Christmas story through the lens of envy – the wanting what you don't have – and jealousy – the desperate anxiety to keep what you do have.

I once invited a small group of a dozen people to gather around a Christmas crèche scene. I asked each person to take one figure out of the stable and tell everyone else why they'd chosen it. One man chose the donkey. He said "I know I'm not the brightest spark in the box, but I like to stay as close to Jesus as I can." One woman chose Balthasar, the first of the wise men, who brought the gold. She said, "I long to make beautiful things and give them to Jesus, even when he's not in much of a spot to use them. That's the way I worship." Another woman chose one of the shepherds. She said, "I feel I've spent most of my life out on the hillsides. Somehow church has felt like Bethlehem – too cozy and settled for me. My life is wild and outdoors. But every now and again I want to come close to the mystery, like the shepherds did that night, and like I'm doing now."

But then a man of few words and many noble actions stepped up. And he picked out Joseph. He had some difficult things to say, so he didn't look at the rest of us while he was speaking – he looked at the small

wooden figure in his hand instead. He said, "I've chosen Joseph, because for several years I felt like I was Joseph. My wife became a Christian a long time before I did. All the while she kept talking about this 'Holy Spirit' character. She was a whole lot more interested in the Holy Spirit than she was in me, that's for sure. Later, I became a Christian myself, and I sort of understood. But I identify with Joseph. Mary's expecting a baby, and I'm supposed to believe this story about an angel and the Holy Spirit. I've heard of 'He made me do it,' and 'I don't know what came over me,' but this is ridiculous. I spent all those years envying the Holy Spirit, and looking jealously at my wife; and I kind of wonder whether maybe Joseph did too."

Joseph isn't center stage in the Christmas story. Well may he feel jealous and envious. If you and I manage to conjure up envy in our obscure and ordinary lives, how much more so Joseph, when he's up against the Holy Spirit? But I want to look very closely with you at what he does, because I believe it gives us clues, jealous and envious as we are, as to how we should model our lives on his.

Matthew gives us the basics of the story without accompanying sentiment. "When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Now, an unexpected pregnancy is a deeply confusing thing today as well as back then. It opens the door to a whole bunch of things that occupy the imagination but about which it's hard to talk with almost anyone, and it trespasses into a host of sensitivities – from those who'd love to be pregnant but aren't, to those whose haste to judgement perhaps masks a more complex history of their own. All of which lead to the hesitant words, "Well.... I guess it's congratulations!" But add to that the tiny problem that the betrothed husband is quite sure he's not the father of the child, and that the historic penalty for adultery is death by stoning, and this is a social catastrophe on a grand scale. No one has a clue what to say.

When we look at this story we immediately see it from Mary's point of view. It's terrifying to think of the vulnerability of a teenage girl in a world that focuses so much of its fascination and anger on sexual transgression. Surely it's not fair or reasonable to make a young girl the focus of a society's pent-up fury.

We're right to see through the eyes of Mary. But today I want to see through Joseph's eyes. I want to look at three stages in Joseph's response to Mary's startling news. The first thing that Matthew tells us is that Joseph was "a righteous man." In other words, Joseph was a keeper of the law. Anyone concerned for justice has got to have a lot of sympathy for Joseph. He's done the right thing. He's gone through a formal betrothal, he's waited for this young girl of 13 or 14 to grow a year older, he's preparing for when she'll come to his home and be his wife. We talk a lot about justice in our society, but this is an illustration of where being just doesn't come close to dealing with the real problem. Justice suggests the young girl should be exposed and humiliated, Joseph be exonerated, and no doubt some financial accommodation made to recognize the damage to his wellbeing and reputation from this public disgrace. But what if Joseph loved Mary? What if he was jealous for her, not as a piece of property, but as the love of his life? What if he didn't stop loving Mary whatever she might have been up to? No money or public humiliation could give him what he really wanted. What he wanted was her. Justice is an important word in our society. But I wonder how often, as for Joseph, all our striving for it still fails to give us what we really want.

Joseph knows this. And so he seeks a second word. Matthew tells us Joseph was "unwilling to expose [Mary] to public disgrace," and so he "planned to dismiss her quietly." I don't think we should underestimate the tortured human emotions buried within this simple description. A lot of us quite happily sing songs that say that Jesus took the sins of the whole world on his shoulders on the cross – but we wouldn't dream of shouldering a single sin of someone else's ourselves. This is the hidden, unrewarded part of love – Joseph shoulders the social shame himself, and looks a fool, even though he's done absolutely nothing wrong. I wonder if you know what this feels like. Somebody has hurt you, wounded you, taken advantage of you – but for their sake and for their salvation, you carry the shame on yourself, and never breathe a word about it, even when you endure their name being praised and honored by all and sundry. The second word Joseph seeks is mercy. For Joseph, mercy outweighs justice.

When you see or know a person facing public disgrace, does your heart jump to justice or to mercy? Do you eagerly devour the headlines that proclaim righteous indignation and groveling humiliation? Do you think, "Look, at least there's someone in the world who's worse than me," or do you think, "It's about time one of those cheats and scoundrels finally got their comeuppance"? I wonder whether the church has got so carried away with righteousness and justice that we've forgotten what Joseph shows us so vividly – that mercy outweighs justice. The truth is that any of us, if everything about our lives was exposed to public scrutiny, would be up for humiliation and disgrace, and begging for mercy and understanding. If only, like Joseph, mercy was our reflex rather than justice and even vengeance. If only we practiced the mercy we beg for.

And now for the third step in Joseph's journey. Like any other person in distress, Joseph does the most sensible thing. He goes to sleep. But, like his namesake in the Genesis story, Joseph dreams. And, like the first Joseph, this Joseph trusts his dreams. In this dream the angel of the Lord tells him who the father of Mary's child truly is, and what this new baby will one day be and do. Our first reaction might be to say, "Oh, that's all right then. I was a bit worried for a moment there about how Mary was going to get out of that one and how Joseph was going to endure the exposure and embarrassment, let alone his jealousy over his betrothed and his envy at the true father. But now we see it's all God's doing, and it's part of a big plan to save everyone and be with them forever, then that's obviously all in order. No problem. Carry on." But don't lose the human part of the story. Joseph has got to revise everything he previously thought was normal. It's not like regular life is ever going to return for him. He'll never be a father – always a Godfather.

And this is the crucial moment in the story for Joseph. This is the crucial moment in the story for you and me. This is the moment when we have to decide whether we're going to be a righteous person – a person of justice and perhaps even of mercy – or whether we're actually going to be a Christian. Now is the moment when Joseph chooses which story he's going to be in. The jealousy story goes like this: "I want to be the only person in Mary's life – and whoever's at the root of this, I'm going to get them." The justice story goes like this: "I shouldn't have to pay for other people's mistakes – so this time I'm going to make someone else pay." The mercy story goes like this: "We all make mistakes, and I care deeply about Mary, and I've got nothing to gain from making a public spectacle of her – so let's just bring this episode to an end as generously and gently as we can."

But there's another story. It's called the grace story. It goes beyond justice, and beyond mercy. It goes like this: "I've realized that I never was the main character in this story. This was always a story about God and how God was being present and saving his people. It's just that I never realized all that till now. It's amazing. I get to be the godfather to this child whose father is God. I know my life will never be normal again, I know no one will ever fully understand my side of this story, I know Mary is one of the most special people there ever was and I'll always feel small beside her. But I want to live a life open to God's Spirit, I want to live a life that's always ready to be turned upside-down by God, I want to be a person at whom others will point and say, 'That's what grace can do.'"

Joseph chose the grace story. The rest of the story is what we call the gospel. We don't all get to choose whether to be the godfather of the Son of God. But we all face moments of truth that challenge us to choose which story we're going to be in. Maybe you're at such a moment right now. Maybe you're facing injustice, illness, disappointment, betrayal, financial crisis, a big decision. Which story is going to be your story? Will it be envy and jealousy, that want to have what others have, and keep tight hold of what you have? Will it be righteousness and justice, that do the proper thing, even if it's not going to give you what deep down you really want and need? Will it be mercy, taking onto yourself the sins of others and recognizing the fragile humanity in us all?

Or will it possibly, just possibly, be grace – grace that lets God take over your story, grace that makes you realize you were always a small part in a story that was truly about God, grace that melts envy and heals jealousy and transcends justice and exudes mercy, grace that turns your whole life into worship of the God revealed in Jesus?

Joseph chose grace, and the rest of the story is what we call gospel. Now it's our turn.