

Lent Devotional Day 1, February 14, 2018

ASH WEDNESDAY

We know very, very little about Joseph. Some legends make him an old man who died while Jesus was growing up, but we don't know that for sure. We know he worked in the building trade, including what we call carpentry. We know he could trace his ancestry back to the ancient royal house of David and Solomon (many first-century Jews knew their family history as well as many today know the story of their favourite soap opera, or the fortunes of their football team). And we know that Joseph faced a unique personal and moral challenge, and came through it with integrity and humility. Joseph, in this passage, provides a sharply personal angle for us to approach Matthew's gospel.

Think how it was for him. Marriage beckons, quite likely arranged by the two families but none the less an exciting prospect. A home. Children. A new status in the community — in a small town where everyone knows everyone else and where, without television, everybody else's life is part of a complex daily soap opera.

And then the shock. Mary has news for him, news to send a chill down the spine of any prospective husband. How can he possibly believe her strange story? What will people say? So he plans, with a heavy heart, to call the whole thing off.

Then, the dream. Mary's story is true. What's more, she and her child are caught up, not just in a personal challenge, but in a much older, stranger purpose. God's purpose. God's rescue operation, long expected and at last coming true. The child to be born will be 'Emmanuel', God-with-us. God with us to save us: hence the name 'Jesus', the same word as 'Joshua', the great leader who brought the people of Israel across the Jordan into the promised land. The name means 'Yahweh saves'. God with us; God to the rescue.

Whenever God does something new, he involves people — often unlikely people, frequently surprised and alarmed people. He asks them to trust him in a new way, to put aside their natural reactions, to listen humbly for a fresh word and to act on it without knowing exactly how it's going to work out. That's what he's asking all of us to do this Lent. Reading the Bible without knowing in advance what God is going to say takes humility. Like Joseph, we may have to put our initial reactions on hold and be prepared to hear new words, to think new thoughts, and to live them out. We all come with our own questions, our own sorrows and frustrations, our own longings. God will deal with them in his own way, but he will do so as part of his own much larger and deeper purposes. Who knows what might happen, this year, if even a few of us were prepared to listen to God's word in scripture in a new way, to share the humility of Joseph, and to find ourselves caught up in God's rescue operation?

TODAY

Speak to us, Father, in a new way as we read your word. Help us to hear your voice and follow where you lead.