

## Matthew 1: 18-25 – A Man’s Christmas

### Prayer

If last Sunday was – as DT told us – Pink Panther Sunday, then today has to be Ronnie Barker Sunday – 4 candles!

If I had to give a title to this sermon it would be a *Man’s Christmas*. Let’s be bold and maybe provocative. We often hear statements like *Christmas is really for the children*. We all know the ooh-ing and aah-ing that goes on at school and nursery Nativity plays. And that’s fine. Women generally know what Christmas is about – hard work, in charge of the kitchen and generally directing the show. We men know our place – the most we can hope for is the Oscar for the best supporting actor. We Welshmen may be more sentimental than some but there is a limit on the sweet baby Jesus stuff that any self-respecting bloke can take. I guess that for many men an ideal Christmas would mean lots of food and other refreshment, sport on the tele and space for shut eye without any comments about – *yes, you were snoring*.

There’s a lot of uncertainty about what it means to be a man in today’s world. The church is a strange beast indeed. The leadership is dominated by men who wear long dresses, while as regular worshippers they tend to be in the minority in most congregations. All clergy know the feeling when they call at a door, the man opens it, sees the dog-collar and immediately responds, *I’ll call the wife*. Religion and churchgoing is more often seen as women’s business. We are presented with all kinds of role models of manhood in our culture – Harry Kane, Rishi Sunak, Hamza Yassin, Freddy Flintoff, David Treharne... make your own list. Some more impressive than others.

So how do we respond when following Christ is not generally seen as a bloke thing? Joseph is there in the Nativity scene but the way he’s portrayed is often the ineffectual and slightly wet character who failed to book a bed in advance in Bethlehem and the best he could come up with was a manger for his new-born. But is this actually fair? There are other men in the story – the shepherds. Now shepherds were not usually seen as nice people. You locked up your daughters when the shepherds were in town. They were men who spent their time with sheep and goats in the hills, not interacting with civilised people like you and me. And the second set of visitors to the new-born was a group of very sophisticated wise men from the Iraq-Iran border, men who had studied astronomy, philosophy and mathematics, men who were among the most highly educated of their day. But if that is not enough to convince us that the Christmas story is for men of all ages and backgrounds, then note this – Matthew tells the story of Jesus’ birth from Joseph’s point of view.

Joseph was a good man. He was betrothed to Mary, which is more than engaged. In the Middle East then – as in many parts of the world still today – marriage was a process more than an event, and betrothal was the first stage of marriage. Mary was probably a teenager of around 15 or so. The bombshell came when Joseph discovered Mary to be pregnant, and the one thing he did know was that he was not the father. He drew the obvious conclusion – obvious but in this case, wrong, and he resolved to divorce her. Divorce was the word used for breaking a betrothal as well as a marriage. Then he had a dream and an angel appeared to Joseph to explain that Mary’s pregnancy was the work of the Holy Spirit. Joseph was told to go ahead and marry her and give the child the name Jesus, Joshua, Yeshua – all the same name and a reasonably common name. It means *God is the Saviour* – of his people, of us all. He was Emmanuel – *God with us*, a word that links us back to the

passage in Isaiah. Joseph's dream ties in with the great story from what we call the Old Testament. It wasn't off the wall. It fitted.

Think about it. God tells Joseph to do something quite remarkable – to stand faithfully by a woman who was carrying a child not his, to marry her and look after her and the child as though it were his own. He would give the child his name and the precious gift of his ancestry, because Joseph like Mary was a descendant of king David, the great king. Joseph was told to stand by Mary and trust her. Of course behind all this was the invitation to trust God. My admiration for Joseph grows. What he did was incredibly courageous in standing by Mary and taking responsibility for her welfare and the welfare of the child. This was the gritty reality show of Bethlehem, where Joseph was indeed the key supporting figure. Joseph recognised that the focus in his family was not him, nor indeed was it Mary, but this unborn son who would be called Yeshua, Jesus. He knew he had a part to play, but it was not the major role. He had a bit part. We simply do not know what happened to Joseph. His last appearance was when Jesus was about 12 years old, going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. The usual assumption is that he died when Jesus was a teenager or in his early twenties. Joseph had his part to play and he played it.

Although Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth from Joseph's perspective it was never about Joseph. It was about Emmanuel – God with us. As Jesus grew he gave us a model of what it means to be a man that is far more impressive than any I might have mentioned earlier or indeed that you may have thought of. Jesus is a model not only of what it means to be a man, but he is at the same time, the image, literally the icon of God. Truly a man, a bloke and truly divine, Son of God. This is the confession of Scripture that we find in the creeds. He is someone worth knowing, worth following, who transcends gender and the stereotypes. Jesus challenges us, men, women and children, to pick up our cross and follow him. This is a man's man who calls us on. We men must be careful never to think that Christianity, that Christmas is something for the women and children. Maybe we identify more with the outdoor shepherds, practical men or the intellectuals from the east or the faithful husband Joseph, Jesus is the man – born for you, died for you and rose again for you.

Prayer