
The sermon text for today is based on the Gospel, Matthew Chapter 1, verses 18 to 25.

Provided by The Lutheran Church of Australia

As I said at the beginning of our worship, today's focus will be on Joseph and his part in the coming of our Lord Jesus. So let's begin with a little Bible quiz about Joseph—just three quick questions:

1. Do you remember what Joseph's trade was? He was a carpenter. We think of Jesus as a carpenter, but that's mainly because we know Joseph was a carpenter. In the Gospels according to Matthew and Mark, people ask of Jesus, '*Isn't this the carpenter's son?*'

2. Here in today's Gospel Reading is the first time we hear of Joseph. Do you remember the last time we hear of him in the Gospels? It's in the Temple twelve years after Jesus' birth, when Mary and Joseph lost Jesus because, as Jesus says, he was in his true Father's house. We hear of Mary right up to the crucifixion, but the last we hear of Joseph is when Jesus is twelve years old, which leads most people to guess that Joseph probably died some time after that, *perhaps* because he was older than Mary. But we don't know that for sure.

3. Now for the last quiz question. Do you remember how many things Joseph says in the Gospels? It's a trick question actually. The answer is...none; not one recorded word from Joseph. Joseph comes across as the 'strong, silent' type and we'll return to this later in the sermon.

For these sorts of reasons, Joseph is an intriguing and even mysterious character. But what we want to see today is that his role in God's plan of salvation is no less significant because of it.

So, as we think more about Joseph, let's look first at his *predicament*; second, at his *task*; and third, at his *response*.

First, what is Joseph's predicament? His quandary? His dilemma? In simple terms, Joseph's predicament is that he is pledged to be married to Mary; Mary is pregnant, and the one thing Joseph knows for sure is that he is not the father. So what to do?

If we probe a little deeper, we can discover there's actually two possible ways of reading this situation, both of which could leave Joseph in a difficult spot. The one we most commonly hear, is that Joseph assumed that Mary had been unfaithful to him. Now this may have been difficult just on the personal level. But more than that, according to the law and social custom, it would've created big problems for Joseph to take Mary as his wife if it was known she had been unfaithful to him. So divorce seems to be the inevitable end. The problem, then, is that this sort of thing could be punished quite severely according to the law. So Joseph is in a predicament. He is a righteous man and comes across as a kind and merciful man. So what is he to do?

Well, he arrives at a less than ideal solution but the best he can work out—arranging the divorce but doing it quietly and so not creating more problems for Mary. Quite a predicament! This is the most common way to read this situation, and I think is the most likely. But there is another possibility that is worth considering, which is how many in the early church understood this story.

According to the alternative understanding of this story, Mary told Joseph about the visit to her by the angel and the news that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit, and that Joseph believed her. So he wasn't suspicious of her, but he believed her. One of the things to remember here is that Joseph wasn't a modern materialistic sceptic. He was a faithful, believing first century Jew who would've been much more open to God's miraculous intervention than people today would be.

So if this understanding of the story is correct, then the predicament of Joseph is that he is overwhelmed by the magnitude of what is happening and what he is being called to do. He perhaps feels unworthy about caring for the holy child. So again, what to do?

Okay, divorcing Mary and running away from the situation may not be the best option. But it's the sort of thing a lot of the prophets felt like doing when God called them into his service. So whether Joseph is suspicious of adultery, or he is overwhelmed by the presence of God's holiness, he finds himself in a predicament.

Now let's pause because there's a connection here with our lives today.

As people of God today, as married people, as Christian families, we find ourselves in our fair share of predicaments, don't we? And if we take our faith seriously, if we want to hear what God has to say to us and live according to his will, this doesn't necessarily mean we have *less* difficult situations. In fact it can mean we have *more* of them.

Let me give you a very simple example, which perhaps some of you are facing right now. Let's say Christmas lunch this year is scheduled for 12:30 at the rellies' place. This part of the family isn't involved in the life of the church. The problem for you is that it's a two-hour drive to their place. Church is at 9:30. So by the time we finish and get on the road you're thinking: "Hmm, are we going to make it? Are they going to be upset if we're late?" And so on...

Now at one level this may not sound like a big deal. But still, this small example can simply illustrate for us that our faith constantly raises these predicaments, dilemmas, and difficult situations. Many of you are facing your own particular ones right now, no doubt. In these experiences it can simply be good to remember that even the 'holy family' of Joseph, Mary and Jesus was not exempt. God's interaction in their life is disruptive and confusing, at least at first.

Do you think it's hard being late to lunch because of church? Imagine explaining that you're late to lunch because an angel had just visited you! And in fact it gets a lot worse after this for the holy family, because they are forced to flee to Egypt to escape Herod. But notice too, that God does not leave Joseph in his predicament. God intervenes through his angel and reassures Joseph, comforts him, and assures him who this child is and where he is from. God enters into Joseph's predicament.

Now we are not promised such extraordinary angelic interventions in all our difficult situations. But let us be open to God's coming into them, to lead us through them, and to work all things for good according to his purposes.

So that is our first point: The *predicament* of Joseph.

Now we move onto the task of Joseph. What is Joseph actually called to *do*?

The reality is that biologically, Joseph was not needed. We confess from this text and from Luke's account that we believe... '*In Jesus Christ our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit...*' The Christian church has always confessed that the conception of Jesus was a miracle. The church confesses that the Son of God became a human being in this world not through the normal processes of a man and woman coming together, but through the power and work of the Holy Spirit in Mary. Biologically speaking, Jesus had no human father. So what is the task of Joseph?

You could say Joseph is called to be a foster-father of sorts—to adopt and care for and protect Jesus as his own. He certainly does a good job of that especially in the flight to

Egypt. So Joseph is sometimes called the guardian of Jesus. Notice too that Joseph is addressed by the angel as ‘Son of David’.

So, there’s something going on here to do with the fulfilment of the covenant that God made with David—that by Joseph becoming Jesus’ legal father the rightful King will come to his throne. But connected to this in the text, we read of a very specific task Joseph is given, which is the naming of Jesus: *‘Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him... Jesus...’*

Now, you’ve probably noticed that names seem to carry a lot more significance in the culture and time of the Bible than they do for us today in our culture. But even today we still often spend a lot of time thinking about what to name our children, don’t we? It’s fairly important to us. Just imagine if someone tried to restrict this freedom. Imagine if the government tried to tell people what they could and couldn’t name their children! We seem to instinctively know there’s something very important about names, and so there is a certain honour and gravity in the giving of a name.

So Joseph’s task is to name the child, not using a name of his own choosing, but with the name the Lord supplies: *‘You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’*

Let’s think a little about the name Joseph is to give the child. The name ‘Jesus’ comes from two Hebrew words, which together mean ‘the Lord saves’. Notice the emphasis in his name—Jesus comes to save. This is who he is; this is his work; this is his mission. He comes to save his people. He comes to save you.

Jesus does other things. He teaches, he heals, he works miracles, and so on. But everything else serves this main purpose of being the Saviour. This is no small point. Just about everyone is willing to acknowledge Jesus in some way—as a great teacher, as a spiritual guru, or as a nice guy. But the only way to truly know him is as the Saviour.

The reason that it’s difficult to acknowledge him as Saviour is that it also requires realising your problem is much deeper than you think. So, for example, if all we need is a bit more information and guidance, then Jesus the teacher will do. But if our problem is that actually we are broken from the core; if our condition is terminal, then we need a Saviour. And notice what he saves from!

Many people of that time were hoping for a saviour—a saviour from the Romans, a saviour from their enemies, a saviour from all the problems out there. But the angel says he comes to save his people from their sins. Salvation is about delivering us from the problem inside of us—in our sinful hearts.

Jesus comes to save you from your sins. He does this by taking your sins on himself on the cross, and so removing their power. And he's not only Jesus, the Saviour. He's also Immanuel; God with us, God for us. So that's the awesome task of Joseph—*naming* Jesus.

Now finally and more briefly, let's note the *response* of Joseph, which is the obedience of faith. *'When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.'*

One of the striking features of both Mary and Joseph in the Christmas event is that when the angel comes with the news of Jesus' birth and gives instructions concerning it, to use the words of the old hymn, they simply *'trust and obey'*. With Joseph it stands out even more because of what we said earlier about there being no record of anything he said. All we have is his action. Joseph hears, trusts, and does what God has called him to do. At the beginning he was in a predicament, and he was unsure and unclear about what to do. He had to work it out as best he could and choose a course of action.

But with a clear word from God to him, there's no great deliberation, no argument, and no second guessing. He simply hears, trusts, and obeys.

So what about for us?

It's true that there are situations we find ourselves in in which it is not always easy to know what God would have us do. Things can be unclear to us, and so we are called to use our Christian wisdom to find the best course of action we can. But perhaps there are not as many of these as we think there are, and in our lives, there are often situations which we make more complicated because we have trouble simply obeying the clear and simple word of God.

There's a time for deliberation and discernment. There's even a place for wrestling with God, and asking our questions, and pouring out our hearts' struggles to him. But there's also a time for simple, trusting obedience. This obedience does not put us right

with God. We stand right before God by faith in Jesus Christ. But from our faith flows a joyful obedience.

So as you face predicaments in your Christian life, remember Joseph, and, as Joseph did, trust God to intervene and lead you through them. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, remember Joseph, the one charged with giving the child the name and all it means, Jesus, the Saviour from sin. And as you believe in Jesus, your Saviour, may a simple and joyful obedience to God's will overflow in your life. Amen.