

## **Sunday 21 December – Fourth Sunday of Advent**

### **Sermon by Harold Toms**

*An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)*

From Advent Sunday, which is effectively the start of the Church year, we have moved in our weekly readings from year C (which mostly draws from Luke's Gospel) to year A (which largely uses Matthew's Gospel). Matthew's Gospel is the first book in the New Testament, reflecting the fact that early scholars believed it to have been the first of the Gospels to be written (modern scholarship asserts that Mark was actually the first). The attribution to "Matthew" dates from the second century, not long after the Gospel was probably written (generally thought to be towards the end of the first century). It shares roughly 600 verses with Mark (which only has 660 in total) and a further 220 verses with Luke, hence these three Gospels are referred to as the "synoptic" Gospels since they share an overall summary or synopsis. Our reading this morning, from the first chapter of Matthew is, however, unique to Matthew telling, as it does, the nativity story from the viewpoint of Joseph, Jesus' father. Mark does not include the Christmas story at all and in Luke the viewpoint is very much Mary's.

This morning's reading began with the words "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way." (Matthew 1:18). In the original greek that word "birth" is actually "genesis" which is also used in the very first verse of this Gospel, which begins:

"An account of the (genesis) of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." Matthew 1:1

Which is itself an almost direct quotation from the book of Genesis (chapter 2 verse 4). Of course, the principal character in our passage today, Joseph, has a name that also points us back to the first book in the Old Testament. But it is more than just a name that links Joseph the carpenter from Nazareth with the Jewish patriarch. Joseph in Genesis is shown to us as a dreamer of dreams, indeed it is those dreams which land him in trouble and cause a rift with his brothers. Not only is he remembered for those dreams, he is also shown to exercise the most incredible mercy when he is re-united with his brothers in Egypt. First he causes them to face

up to what they did, selling him into slavery, but when he reveals himself to them he rejoices that they are together again, there are no recriminations.

Joseph, in the New Testament, is introduced to us as a "righteous man". When he discovers that his betrothed wife, Mary, is already pregnant he resolves to deal with her mercifully. Under Jewish law it would have been his right to have her stoned to death for her adultery. We know that this punishment was still being used at that time from the story in John's Gospel (chapter 8) when a woman caught in adultery is brought before Jesus to test Him. Although she is not stoned we also know that stonings did still occur, in the book of Acts we read about the first Deacon, Stephen, being stoned to death for alleged blasphemy. There must have been some who would have considered that having Mary stoned would be the correct act of a supposedly righteous man, but even before his dream this is not the intention of Joseph who wishes to deal with the matter as discreetly as possible.

Joseph then goes further, by believing what is revealed to him in a dream, he accepts Jesus as his son. In the dream he has been told to call this child "Jesus" which means in Hebrew "He saves", and when the baby is born Joseph duly gives Him this name. In so doing he officially acknowledges Jesus as his first born child. This is really important in that society placing Jesus before the children that Joseph and Mary will go on to have (the Gospels tell us that Jesus had at least two brothers and a number of sisters). By publicly naming Jesus, Joseph legally becomes His father and officially accepts Him as his heir. The story doesn't end there either. We know from the Gospels that Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple; protected Him from Herod by fleeing to Egypt (echoes again of Joseph in Genesis); and during childhood again took Him to the Temple. Joseph passed on his trade as a carpenter to his son and although Joseph is never mentioned during the accounts of Jesus' adult life, after Jesus had read from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth, the amazed crowd ask: "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:22). It seems clear to me that in a very meaningful way Jesus truly was Joseph's son, following His earthly father's example of merciful forgiveness. Clearly Matthew also considers Jesus to have been Joseph's son, the "genesis" or genealogy with which he begins his Gospel traces Joseph's ancestry back to David and Abraham to legitimise calling Jesus "Son of David".

I'm glad that we have these accounts of Jesus' father in Matthew's Gospel. Much of the Christmas story comes from Luke who gives only the story from Mary's perspective. Mary is also present throughout all the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, right up to His death and resurrection whereas, as I've said, Joseph seems to disappear from the story after Jesus' childhood. But, it seems clear to me that Joseph must have been centrally involved in Jesus growing up. It must have been his example that Jesus looked to as a child of how a man should behave. It seems to me that Joseph earns that description of "righteous" in the way he first resolves to treat Mary (trying not to publicly shame or dishonour her) and then believes the vision of the dream and accepts Jesus as his true son.

The account from Luke rightly shapes most of our perceptions of that first Christmas, of Jesus' birth in humble circumstances in Bethlehem. Luke also gives us one interpretation of what the birth of this baby is going to mean. Mary sings of how the poor and humble will be lifted up and the rich and mighty cast down - a theme that runs throughout Luke's Gospel. But, although much more concise, Matthew's account also contains important truths about Jesus. The angel in Luke does tell Mary that her son is to be called "Jesus", but it is in Matthew that the significance of that name is explained: the meaning of the Jewish name Joshua (Jesus is the Greek rendering of it) is "he saves" for "He will save His people from their sins". Matthew also includes the prophetic scripture from Isaiah about a young woman giving birth to a child to be called Emmanuel ("God with us"). These fulfilment scriptures are a feature of Matthew's account that we will encounter again as we read through his Gospel. Joseph's act of mercy and forgiveness, right at the start of the story pre-figures what Jesus will teach His followers, the "Law of love" that is the great gift of Christmas to us all. Amen.