

Sermon: 2019/12/22 (4th Sunday of Advent, Year A) - Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7,16-18; Romans 1:1-7; and, Matthew 1:18-25_BTR

[Invite children to the front. Jar of (big, green) pickles.]

[Remove a pickle from a jar.]

What is...*this*?
Can anyone tell me?

[Wait for response.]

That's right!

A pickle.

Which reminds me that, in England, we have an expression:

"To be in a pickle."

Do you know that saying?

What does it mean?

[Wait for response.]

Yes.

To be in difficulty.

Especially, a difficulty about choosing between *two*, tough options.

Well, we hear from Isaiah today that King Ahaz was in "a pickle."

He was in a pickle because he was afraid of two other little kingdoms "ganging up" on him; bullying him: [King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah - 7:1].

And so he planned to make an alliance - make a friend - with a much, much, *much* bigger country, "Assyria."

But Isaiah - the prophet - came and said to King Ahaz, "Why don't you ask God for *His* help instead of Assyria's?"

And Ahaz, who doubted faith in God but felt like he couldn't admit that publicly, pretends to be a religious person, saying: "[No, no,] I will not put the Lord to the test."

In other words, he lied.

He lied to avoid facing the truth about himself: which is that He wasn't really sure if God *could* help him escape his "pickle" with the bullies.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we pray for your help that we will be honest people, especially as we are confronted with the seemingly too-good-to-true miracle which is the first Christmas. Help us in our doubts, inspire us to ask those questions that will reveal deeper knowledge about you. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Dismiss children.]

You know, sometimes people to say to me: "Why are there *four* gospels (and not only one)?"

"And why are there four gospels that don't repeat exactly, word-for-word, *every* detail of *every* little thing that concerns Jesus' *earthly* life?"

That seems suspicious, to some.

Suspect.

It can *appear* like a problem for the reliability of the Holy Scriptures.

And what I don't think is that that is a stupid question, and you should just accept these things unquestioningly.

No, the matter of the reliability of the Bible as an *accurate* record of *historical* events that transformed *real* men and women - like us, sinners, events that have had *enormous* significance even down to *this* day is something we need to be able to rely on:

"Able to rely on" like a hook for a hat.

At home, on Ben Lomond Drive, we've a *whole* "bunch" of hats on a set of hooks in our living-room:

we're not, if I'm being honest, *big* "hat-people," but, occasionally, I do reach for one.

In fact, I just got a new felted-wool fedora the other day from my lovely wife as an early Christmas present; and when I put out my hand for it I want to know that it *will* be where it was hung(!), and not on the floor.

Not being trampled on.

Not in the dust with the muddy, wet shoes.

And the same is true for our faith: it "hangs" on evidence - of things that actually happened, *fantastical* things.

Like the 'birth of Jesus the Messiah'.

Which is why Matthew, we see, is at pains to *describe* it as an occurrence, which, and I quote: 'took place *in this way*'.

He doesn't, then, "gloss over" the 'way'.

He doesn't "wave" it away with a: "Oh, just have faith."

He doesn't say, "Just believe that it happened; it doesn't really matter what or when or how."

No! He *names* the people closest to the miracle itself - they were flesh; not fiction.

But, what makes Matthew's account unique is his focus.

This time last year - which was ecclesial year "B" - our theme was *solidly* Mary, the mother of the man whom we worship.

Notice, though, that our reading this morning *hardly* mentions her:

our author is clearly more interested in the other human parent, "Joseph."

Matthew, therefore, isn't contradicting his friend, Luke:

rather, we have at least a second gospel because there is at least one other "angle" that was overlooked elsewhere; one about Christ's *adoptive* father.

Mary is *incredible*, yes.

A teenage-mum,

who carries a *strange* baby "to term" in spite of scandal and gossip, and does so because an 'angel' - a bedroom-invader - told her that the boy was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

And I preached before on this occasion about what an *amazing* example of discipleship she represents: 'To persevere when "reasonable" people say: "Give up."'

But what about her husband, then?

What does *his* example - often overlooked - have to teach us?

Well, first of all, the Bible tells us *here* - in our text, this morning - specifically, in verse nineteen, that Joseph was a 'righteous man'.

And - let us be clear about its precise meaning, that of the original author - to be "righteous" means to be someone who *habitually* cleaves to *right* principles.

And let's be even more exact:

by "right" principles what we *really* mean are those statutes and morés - that ethic - outlined in places like *Exodus, Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*.

Some of *the* most *venerable* texts in the world.

Now, I love that word: "cleave."

It's reassuringly "old-timey," isn't it?

It means to stick one's self to something, like with a strong glue:

"to make an inseparable bond."

And Joseph's reputation, we are told, was just that:

He *strictly* abided the Law; faithfully, *kept* the commandments.

Which is to say that he held the Pentateuchal tradition and its *stringent* requirements in *high* regard.

And because he did that;

because he *deeply* cared about both participating in and perpetuating those standards handed to his people for their safekeeping, many centuries before, on Sinai; that when he discovered that Mary - his (young) fiancé - was "with child," he

looked - and I quote - 'to dismiss her'.

And that's because, then, as a 'righteous man', he hadn't had sex with someone who wasn't (yet) his wife. And so the most reasonable assumption in the world was that she had had "relations" with somebody else.

And if she had done *that*, she had violated her betrothal agreement, which was, in Israel, as it is described in the Torah, a *legal* arrangement.

(The phrase Matthew uses is actually a *single* word - in Greek, "apolusai" - and it is the exactly same term that Jesus uses when he is asked about divorce in chapter five.)

In other words, Mary had not only, *seemingly*, in Joseph's eyes, been promiscuous; unfaithful *subjectively* speaking, she was, *objectively*, an *oath-breaker*; that is to say, a criminal.

Someone who hadn't upheld a binding contract.

Why do such things matter?

Self-restraint, promise-keeping, *honour*.

Because the alternative is *anarchy*.

"Right" and "wrong" in the Bible can *feel* in the 21st century to be out-of-date; antiquated, even quaint.

We're accustomed to thinking that there is some mystical "higher" law, which is..."my heart."

My preferences.

"Let it go, let it go" as Elsa sings.

And "seize the moment."

But God's *eternal* choice of Joseph to be His earthly father suggests the opposite: That, in the first and in *every* instance, the rules of living outlined in the Holy Scriptures remain *supreme* - that they are an *enduring* framework to guide our conduct.

But there's *another* side - a *second* aspect - to this "equation" too, which we mustn't overlook.

And it's easily missed:

it finds expression in a *single* word.

What is that word?

The word is, 'quietly'.

He 'planned to dismiss her... *quietly*.'

Why is this significant?

Because though the Law is God's holy, unchanging straitjacket for us; for society - one we've *no* right to reinterpret in our own image, and one we ignore to our peril - it demands careful, *sensitive* implementation.

In other words, *compassion*.

For that is why God gave it:

after all, when God first speaks in *Exodus*, to Moses, a shepherd - like those later in the stable, He says these words:

"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; *I have heard their cry* on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, *I know their sufferings*, and I have come down to deliver them..." [Ex. 3:7-8a]

So the Law, which was so dear to Joseph, sprung from - its primordial source - is *compassion*.

A compassion which we can readily embrace for the same reason he did:

A compassion born from clear-eyed self-knowledge - of what?

Of all of our (fundamental) "fallenness."

This is why Joseph doesn't 'expose her [Mary] to public disgrace' like that crowd who were going to stone the woman caught in adultery in *John 8*.

Remember them?

"Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." [v.3f.]

That's what Christ says to them.

Joseph, though, doesn't need telling this.

And again, this must be significant as to why *he* was chosen to raise mankind's Savior.

It is the *very* same example - *a balance*, you might call it, between ideal and its implementation - that his adoptive Son, our Lord, will evidence in the gospels: He both *loved* prostitutes and tax-collectors as friends and intimates *and* also *cleaved* to the Law - the ancient ways of the former Covenant, and did so, in fact, *perfectly*; [Heb. 12:2 & 1 Pet. 2:22]

and He *needed* to;

He needed to so as to free us from the penalty for when *we inevitably* fail to do the same.

Praise the Lord, then, for His birth in Bethlehem.