

Sermon Thursday 19th March

HOW WE CAN ALL PLAY OUR PART AND PRAY – Sermon by Rev Ian READINGS: 2 Samuel 7: 4-16; Matthew 1: 18-end

May I speak in the Name of the Living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, we're broadcasting this Service to you this morning on Thursday 19th March at 10.30. You may watch it later from somewhere else and we have in mind that all Churches of the UK have a National Day of Prayer on Sunday – Sunday 22nd March. And I want to say something this morning that will encourage us all as we sit at home in our different places and as we look forward to that Day of Prayer.

And I'd just like to begin by saying two Passages which are very familiar to most of us and which are really important. The first one is from 1 Corinthians 12, where the Apostle Paul reminds us that we are a Body. We are all parts of the Body of Christ here on earth, and it doesn't matter whether we're together or apart. We'll all part of a Body, and we all have a part to play. No part is less important than another. Some parts may be more obvious than others, and some may be more hidden. But wherever we are, we can play a part, and the distance that we're apart makes no difference to God. 'There's no distance,' somebody said, 'in the Spirit' – and I believe that! We're all together, and we can pray together.

The second Scripture I'd just like to share before I talk about Joseph is from the First Letter of Timothy, Chapter 2, where Pauls says 'First and foremost, pray for leaders and all in authority that you may lead a peaceful and quiet life in all godliness and holiness.' So, with those two thoughts in mind – that we all have a part to play and that we all should be praying for our leaders -, I just want to say a few brief words about Joseph.

Now there are only about 14 references to Joseph in the New Testament, and they are almost all in Matthew and Luke. He's mentioned once in Mark as 'the carpenter' or 'the carpenter's son', but the main things that we know about Joseph – if we don't go to other traditions – are in the Bible in Matthew 1 and 2 and in Luke 1 and 2.

So, let's just remind ourselves very briefly of what he did and the important part he had to play:

Well, first of all, he was called to be the husband of Mary, and when he heard that she was pregnant, he was thinking he had to divorce her. But notice his character: he wanted to do it very discreetly and quietly. He didn't want to expose her to public shame. But, at that point, an angel of God appears to him in a dream and says 'Don't do this!' And, interestingly, he calls him, not 'son of Jacob' (which was his immediate father), but 'son of David'. 'You are a descendant of David!' He was reminding him of who he was, and he said 'You go ahead and marry her!'. So that's the first thing.

So he went ahead and married her, and in a very protective and loving way - you know it in the Christmas Story -, he took her from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and, although not much is

said about that, just think of all care that was involved, taking her from one place to the other, when she was very heavily pregnant.

Then, of course, the baby was born, and Joseph was there as well. And he was there, when the shepherds came and visited. We actually believe that the Wise Men probably came some time in the next two years. And, according to Luke's Gospel, almost certainly to a 'house' and not to a 'stable'. And I'll talk about that in a moment.

The next event, chronologically, is that 40 days after Jesus is born, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem for the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, which we also call 'Candlemas' (where we also pray for our candles and so on). And that was the day when Simeon and Anna came and prayed for the child. – Simeon, using those very wonderful words of the Nunc Dimittis: 'Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace', and so on. And then we have the Visit of the Magi. And after that, if we go back to Matthew's Gospel, we see that there's another dream Joseph has, where he's told to take the mother and the child and flee to Egypt. And that's why the Scripture says it can later say 'Out of Egypt I called my Son', paralleling in some way the calling of Israel out of Egypt at the time of the Exodus. Anyway... so Joseph is the one looking after his wife and the child. And then he returns to Nazareth. He must have thought about returning to Bethlehem, but he's told in another dream, or he's shown in another way, that that could be too dangerous. So, he goes up north, back again to Nazareth.

And the last time that Joseph appears is at that Passover Festival in Luke's Gospel, also in Chapter 2, when Jesus is about 12 years old. And remember: they can't find Jesus, as they are going back home. And they go back and Jesus says to them: 'Didn't you know I would be in my Father's House?' – which must have been a very challenging statement to Joseph, in particular.

It's very interesting. There are two genealogies of Jesus in the Bible. In Matthew's Gospel it looks as if we have an account of Joseph, and we have 'Joseph's genealogy'. And it looks as if Joseph is the legal descendant of King David, and Jesus is therefore the legal descendant of King David. And in Luke's Gospel it looks as if we may have 'Mary's genealogy', which would make him the physical descendant of David. So doubly 'the descendant of David', and Joseph was there, seeing it all happen.

Now, I just want to conclude with these two thoughts, which are very, very helpful to me, and I hope will be helpful to you.

The first one is that Joseph absolutely played his part. He comes into the Gospel Story at this point. He's extremely important in looking after his wife and his child, and then he disappears from the scene. And many people think that he might have been an older man who died, and he's not there, it seems, at the time of the Crucifixion. That's why John is asked to look after Mary and be the new mother ... the new father, as it were ... for Mary. 'The new son', I should say, like Jesus. So the important thing ... importantly ... Joseph had a part to

play, and wherever we are, whatever we are doing now – even if we are confined to home, even if we are under a lockdown in another country, or wherever we are, when we eventually watch this – we all have a part to play.

And I want to suggest to you that, apart from the personal roles you may have, wherever you are (looking after other people, ringing people up, sending people messages on WhatsApp), or whatever you are doing, apart from that, what we can all do is PRAY. And the Scripture says we should ‘pray for kings and rulers and all in authority’.

So just two thoughts on PRAYER, and I will close:

The first one is: IT’S SO IMPORTANT TO LISTEN. You know, we have a Quiet Time on a regular basis -Drew and I here, at St John’s Church in Carterton – and we have a Time of Quiet, when we’re just listening to the Lord, in our Daily Quiet Time. And I’m reminded that the Quakers, for example – and I’ve been to a Quakers’ Service in the past – have a tremendous tradition of ‘Listening’. And did you know that it was Quakers who first abolished the Slave Trade. They heard from God first, it seems to me. And I also have to admit that my mother was a Jewish Refugee from Austria, and it was the Quakers who saw the danger and set up (or they were one of the organisations that set up) the Kindertransport, which were evacuating children from Austria and Germany and other places in Europe at the time of the Nazis. And again, it was because they were LISTENING. So, I would encourage you, wherever you are, to be quiet and LISTEN to God. You’ve got a real opportunity to be quiet. LISTEN TO GOD and see ‘What is He telling you to do?’, ‘What is he telling me to do?’

And the second point I want to make – and this was suggested to me many years ago (and I think it’s very helpful) is ‘HOW ABOUT PRAYING THE NEWS?’ Now we’ll all listening to the News Broadcasts all the time. And they are saying on the News, for example, today, ‘We don’t know what exactly is going to happen about the pupils who are ... were doing their GCSEs and A-Levels.’ Well, when you get a bit of information like that, let me suggest to you: What you can say is ‘Dear God, please make it clear to those in the Ministry of Education and all involved what they should do about GCSEs and A-Levels and give them all WISDOM’. So, whatever you hear on the News, TURN IT INTO A PRAYER. And let’s all try and do that every day, but particularly perhaps on Sunday. Let’s try and LISTEN TO GOD. And let’s try to pray to God and ask Him for the things that are in the News, where answers are needed. Let’s pray that everybody particularly has WISDOM. Everybody needs WISDOM to make the right decisions, whether they are believers or not. We know from the Bible: it doesn’t make much difference in that respect. There have been ‘good rulers’, and if they’ve WISDOM, they’ve made WISE DECISIONS. So, let’s keep praying for our leaders of Government, our Ministers, our Local Councillors, and everybody else who’s helping, and pray they make GOOD DECISIONS.

I’m going close with a Prayer and then hand back to Drew: ‘So, my prayer, Father, today is

that, like Joseph, we would be conscious of the fact that we all have a very important part to play. We're all members of Your Body, and each one of us has an equally important role to play. Some public, some private, some very obvious, some hidden. And the second thing is: May we be people who are moved by your Spirit to PRAY, to LISTEN to what You are saying and to pray the things that are on Your heart that You want to do. Lord, we ask these things in Jesus' Name. Amen