

Introduction

I'm going to describe a Bible character to you – can you tell me who it is. ~ God spoke to him a lot through dreams, when he was a young man he was exiled in Egypt, he had an important role to play in God's plans for his people.

Joseph, yes of course; But which Joseph, Joseph the Son of Isaac or Joseph the husband of Mary? Interestingly, when we think of a Bible character called Joseph we may think of the other one first. Joseph, the husband of Mary and Foster-Father of Jesus can seem a bit of a shadowy figure and we don't always pay much attention to him. He can seem unimportant and not very effective. As I read this morning's Gospel reading and thought about the passage I asked myself, who was Joseph? What can we know of him? What was he like? And I realised what a holy person Joseph must have been and also what a strong, courageous and obedient person he was.

God spoke to him in dreams on a least four occasions. He recognised this was God speaking to him and he made some very courageous choices in response to God's leading. This means He must have been holy, in touch with God, able to recognise him speaking and trusted God enough to obey him

Chapter 1:19-25

Joseph had found his affianced wife was pregnant, being an honourable man he was simply going to divorce her quietly but God spoke to him in a dream and told him that the child Mary was carrying was no ordinary child he was God's son and he was to be the saviour of his people. V 24 He did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. He was prepared to deal with the scorn of the people around him who would not know and certainly wouldn't believe that this child had been conceived by the Holy Spirit they would think Mary had cheated on him and would lack respect for him for not punishing her.

We also see that although he took her home and cared for her he had no union with her until the baby was born. He was

prepared to love her and protect her but not to consummate the marriage.

Chapter 2:13

After the Wise men had departed God spoke to Joseph again in a dream, warning them it was not safe to stay where they were and to take them to Egypt. Herod the Great and his violent and nasty habits – killed anyone he thought threatened him

Egypt was a natural place of refuge for the Jews. At times of peril, persecution or tyranny the Hebrew people escaped to Egypt and there were colonies of Jews in every Egyptian city. So they would find support and people of their own language and customs there.

Joseph was willing to leave the security of his country and the life he had known to flee to a strange land with his wife and a baby that was not his but had been entrusted to him to care for. He knew his role was to protect Mary and to shelter Jesus and so again without question he left all that was familiar and set out on a dangerous journey with his young wife and her tiny baby. He went trusting in God to care for them and also listening to God for further directions because God had told him to stay there until he told him to return.

Before Jesus learned to walk and talk he was a homeless refugee with a price on his head. What must that have been like not only for him but for the man who had been entrusted with protecting and providing for him?

Chapter 2:19-20

After Herod's death God again spoke to Joseph in a dream telling him that those who sought to kill the baby were dead and it was now safe to return. So Joseph once more uprooted himself and his family and returned to Israel. That must have taken obedience and courage. The family had settled in Egypt. Home / work/ relationships returning to the unknown and again they had to travel through hostile territory to get there.

Chapter 2:22

But God's direction and guidance wasn't over yet. Archelaus Herod's son was reigning in Judea and soon showed himself to be no better than his father until he was deposed for misrule in AD6. It would not be safe for Joseph to bring his family there. Galilee was ruled by Herod Antipas, Archelaus' half-brother and it would be a safer place for them to live. So the family went to Nazareth and settled there.

What can we learn from Joseph?

He Listened to God

This was a man who was clearly used to listening to God, who recognised his voice and responded to it. When God spoke to him he wasn't bewildered or confused wondering who this strange voice came from. He recognised it as coming from God himself, which meant he was clearly used to listening to God. Taking time to be available to him and responding to what he heard. The Bible simply takes it for granted. Four times in these verses we read the words "God spoke to him in a dream" and Joseph, because he was a prayerful man and accustomed to hearing

God speak recognised God's voice and responded. He didn't simply dismiss what he'd heard as his imagination. In the same way as we can hear a telephone message or tape recording from someone we know and love we recognise and respond to the voice. This is what Joseph did.

We too need to learn to listen to God. Take time to be quiet with him. Accustom ourselves to hearing him speak so that when we hear him tell us important or challenging things we hear and respond and not simply dismiss them out of hand.

He Trusted God

Joseph had a relationship with God so that when he asked him to do things that were difficult and dangerous he did not hesitate. He knew that taking Mary as wife would lay him open to ridicule and scorn but he trusted God enough to put his own

interests aside and do what he asked him. He knew God was faithful and powerful and could be trusted to care for him in difficult situations.

A television program preceding the 1988 Winter Olympics featured blind skiers being trained for slalom skiing, impossible as that sounds. Paired with sighted skiers, the blind skiers were taught on the flats how to make right and left turns. When that was mastered, they were taken to the slalom slope, where their sighted partners skied beside them shouting, "Left!" and "Right!" As they obeyed the commands, they were able to negotiate the course and cross the finish line, depending solely on the sighted skiers' word. It was either complete trust or catastrophe.

What a vivid picture of the Christian life! In this world, we are in reality blind about what course to take. We must rely solely on the Word of the only One who is truly sighted--God Himself. His Word gives us the direction we need to finish the course. This is what Joseph did. He allowed God to direct him and followed where he led.

The more we trust God the more we discover that he is totally trustworthy. As we learn to trust him in the little things we then become able to make those great leaps of faith. To consider doing the risky and difficult things as Joseph did.

He Obeyed God

Saint Thomas a Kempis said "Instant obedience is the only kind of obedience there is; delayed obedience is disobedience. Whoever strives to withdraw from obedience, withdraws from Grace." The trouble with obedience is that we sometimes try to obey on our own terms to do it our

way. That isn't obedience it is compromise and as such simply leaves us in the wrong place.

Obedience isn't easy it can mean having to stand up against pressure from others but it is important.

Joseph worked for God and obeyed him without question in ways that cost him a great deal. This is something we need to learn to do as well. God calls us to follow him and we need to learn to step out and obey when we hear him prompting us to do things. It isn't easy but we will never be useful servants to God if we follow him on our terms.

He was prepared to suffer mockery, hardship and uncertainty for God

Joseph put God's interests ahead of his own. He had been called to care for and protect Mary and the little child and he did that despite the scorn of his neighbours, the uncertainty of where that would lead him and despite the difficulties that he encountered.

He was an ideal model and foster father for God's son as he grew up and prepared for his earthly ministry. Jesus was safe in his hands and God knew that when he called him in his service.