

Homily – Sunday 18th March 2018 – 6 pm

Tomorrow is the feast day of Joseph of Nazareth, and this evening's readings are also in celebration of Joseph. Those of you who have been coming along to the Lent course will be aware that the story of the nativity only appears in two of the gospels, Matthew and Luke. Most of the familiar parts of the story come from Luke's gospel – including the annunciation when Mary is visited by an angel who tells her she will conceive. Matthew's gospel, however, tells the story of the nativity from Joseph's perspective. It is Joseph who is told in a dream that he must marry Mary; it is Joseph who is also told by an angel that he must escape to Egypt and then Israel, and finally to go to Galilee.

Joseph can in many ways be a character who provides a "way in" to the human story of the Gospels for us... I wonder if you've ever seen Murillo's painting "The Two Trinities"? It shows the infant Jesus, gazing skywards. Mary, in rapt attention, staring at the child. And Joseph, with his eyes fixed outwards towards the viewer – one hand holding the hand of Jesus, and the other almost beckoning us into the picture.

Now that we find ourselves in Lent, though, Joseph has disappeared from the story. As we walk the stations of the cross we are encouraged to look on Mary at the foot of the cross, to imagine what it felt like for her to be faced with her son's death, but we don't see Joseph at all.

This evening's reading reminded me of Joseph's absence and encouraged me to think about what it would have been like for him. I love this story from Jesus's childhood – the only such story in the gospels. It's such a human story in so many ways. It's a situation that most of us can imagine – that sense of horror when a parent realises that their child is missing; the relief on finding them again. And yet, of course, there is that additional aspect – the extraordinariness of Jesus holding his own among the Temple leaders; his peculiar words about being in his father's house.

I wonder what it was like for Joseph to be Jesus's earthly father. Joseph doesn't get a voice in this story – Mary speaks for him. But for me the very fact that he doesn't get a voice gives an impression of even greater faithfulness.

We know that Joseph stood by Mary and I would assume that he brought up Jesus as his own. This poignant story certainly suggests that was the case. Joseph was a father to Jesus – he experienced the anxiety of losing him in the Temple, the relief of finding him, the joy of watching him grow and learn. Like all parents he presumably agonised about giving him enough freedom to become all he was made to be while fearing the risks of that.

So as Jesus faced his death, we can only assume that Joseph experienced some of that extraordinary pain we see in Mary.

I wonder where Joseph was when Jesus was walking towards his death. I wonder whether he was there in the crowds. Whether he was an eyewitness. Or whether he was back home somewhere. Praying, perhaps. Working as a distraction, for something to do to take his mind off what he knew was happening. Knowing that he would be needed by Mary in her grief and distress – ensuring that he had the strength to be there for her.

One of the things I love about Joseph is that he doesn't steal the limelight. The part he plays is apparently very small. And yet he was presumably a central part of Jesus's life for 30 odd years. I admire his faithfulness and resilience. And I love that he gives us yet another angle from which to consider Christ's passion. He connects us with the story, and invites us into it - to be a part of all that is about to unfold. Amen