

Sunday 22 December 2019

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 1:20)

In 1939, in the early, dark days of the Second World War, King George VI in his Christmas radio broadcast offered some words of encouragement to a country facing a time of great danger and uncertainty:

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, “Give me a light, that I may tread safely into the unknown.” And he replied, “Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way.”

The words the king quoted had been written by the then unknown British poet and academic Minnie Louise Haskins, and have since become some of the most familiar words of all time.

Luke’s Gospel focuses on Mary’s experience of the nativity and what precedes it, but here in Matthew we experience these mysterious events from Joseph’s perspective. We are told that Mary and Joseph are betrothed but not yet formally married. Betrothal was a binding agreement between a couple, who would already be regarded as husband and wife. It could only be dissolved by death or divorce, and unfaithfulness during betrothal was judged as adultery.

The seriousness of Mary’s position is underlined by Matthew, when he states that her pregnancy becomes known during this period of betrothal. In the Law of Moses, adultery – for the woman – was considered a crime punishable by stoning to death. By Matthew’s time this had been mitigated, but the penalty was still severe, involving humiliation and ostracism. Joseph could have chosen to protect himself and expose Mary to the full rigours of their society’s judgement, but he was a compassionate man, and decided rather to “dismiss her quietly”. But before he could act on this decision an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream with the startling message that he was not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, because “the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit”.

Joseph’s obedience in response to this baffling message is a textbook example of stepping out in faith and trust, and it enables the next stage of God’s plan to develop. Joseph’s obedience is vital, because the next instruction from the angel is that he is to name the child Jesus. In Israelite society it was generally the father who named the child, so this naming by Joseph implied his acceptance of Mary’s child as his own, adopting him as a true “son of David”.

How do we discern God’s leading, particularly in situations that seem to run counter to what both we and the world might normally expect? Do we find ourselves looking for security, safety and the reassurance that this step won’t expose us to the ridicule or condemnation of our peers? The angel’s message to Joseph sheds no light on his situation that would make sense in human terms. He does receive some reassurance (“do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit”), but no explanation that would enable him to say “I understand!” And with the call comes a challenge, to trust the angelic messenger even though the angel’s words direct him to behave in a way that goes against the norms of the society of the time, and risk exposing him to society’s judgement and ridicule.

Joseph can’t know what lies ahead, only that he is being asked to take this first step of blind obedience. Like the speaker in Minnie Louise Haskins’ poem, he is being asked to [go] out into the darkness, and put [his] hand into the hand of God”. When we find ourselves in situations that bring us similar dilemmas and uncertainty, are we able to act as positively as Joseph, trusting that God is able to lead us where we cannot see? Because the hope and the promise expressed in the

poem are that if we are able to step out with the courage that Joseph shows, then God's way of darkness will offer us far greater things than the light we were originally seeking.

Pointers

1. King George VI speaks words of hope and encouragement in the dark early days of the Second World War.
2. Joseph is told by the angel to accept the pregnant Mary, because the child she carries is from the Holy Spirit.
3. Joseph obeys, adopting the child as his own by naming him Jesus.
4. How do we react if we believe God is asking us to do something that may expose us to ridicule or misunderstanding? Are we able to trust and obey, despite the fact we have no idea where our actions will lead?