

## The Fourth Sunday of Advent Mthr Melanie Marshall

Matthew 1.18-25

As the heirs of Freud and Jung, we are used to seeing dreams as a hotline to our non-conscious selves. And in their classical interpretation of dreams, babies represent problems. Parents are unlikely to find that symbolism surprising. Symbolic babies are, after all, a good bit easier than real babies, who don't so much represent problems as cause them. Childless friends: offer to babysit.

Joseph of Nazareth seems to get the worst of both these worlds. When I dream I've had a baby foisted on me, I wake up and find I haven't. Not Joseph. His baby dream is completely literal. But more than that: it's also completely symbolic. Like our Joseph, the famous Joseph of the book of Genesis is told his future in a dream. He learns that he will be great (much to his brothers'

annoyance). What he is not shown are the costs of that greatness. For Joseph in today's gospel, it's the opposite. The son will be great, but he won't. He too will find himself exiled to Egypt; but not with any elevation to high office in Pharaoh's court. If he accepts the future promised by the dream, at very least his life will be upturned, as lives always are, by the arrival of a baby. But the dream does more. It undercuts the products of Joseph's conscious mind - his imaginative limits, his moral parameters, his conceptions of social and religious order and his place in them. All upturned. By this dream which shows him a deeper reality about himself.

People always say: Joseph! What a mensch. He could have exposed Mary to ridicule, another man would. But he didn't - he wanted to do the decent thing. *Aner dikaios wn*, being a man of honour, since he was a decent bloke.

But the thrust of this gospel is not about the value of being decent. It's about how inadequate decency is, how mean, how feeble, as a response to human need. Divorce her publicly, divorce her privately. Potato, potato. Either way, he gets rid of Mary, keeps his good standing, and gets some upright wife. He's off the hook. She is left literally holding the baby: burdened, disgraced, unprotected. So much for decency.

You know when someone is broken up with and they say 'it's the way she did it', or 'he chose the cruellest day to do it'? No one's fooled. It's not ways or days that hurt you. It's the rejection. Likewise, what Mary needs is not to be divorced in a nice way rather than a nasty one. She needs a husband. And for that, Joseph is going to have to reach beyond decency; beyond reputation, and family succession, and religious purity, and all of those reasonable and respectable concerns that constitute life as he knows it. Is Joseph more 'good' than

the next man? Certainly. Is that what makes him a saint? No. He's a saint because he ditches 'being good', and does this thing, instead. The thing God asks of him. This thing that could look a lot like being bad in the eyes of decent people.

A Dominican friar once told me that one his brothers used to climb mountain passes in South America delivering boxes of prophylactics. When the Vatican was mentioned he would say 'What does the Pope know about these people's lives?'

Of course religion can be a great tool for enforcing decency and order. That's why Karl Marx hated it. It's why Edward Gibbon prescribed it. Islam, Gibbon thought, would make the ideal civic religion, though what he'd make of Saudi and Syria we can only imagine. But Christianity? What does it offer to those who want order and morals? If you want to know who God is, it says: Here. An intractable paradox. Have fun. If you want

a right relationship with God and neighbor, it says: Holy Spirit! It lists where it wills, I'm afraid. So: keep awake!

Keep awake. Our Advent motto. Our Christian motto. Gibbon was bang on. Christianity is no religion. It is an invitation to live in reality. In how things are, not how we wish they were, or think they should be.

That house down the street with the mountain of ill-sorted bin bags outside. What will you do? Call environmental health. Report them. Okay. But maybe they are being evicted. Maybe what you see is the debris of a marriage breakdown, or a bereavement. Maybe they've no car to drive to the dump. Or any money to fix the car. Or enough English to navigate the council website. But encountering that reality might demand something of us. The council can deal with it.

We judge reality so that we don't have to experience reality. You can say 'We can't just bin the rules'. That's true. And if you think the biggest threat facing society is shortage of busybodies, then get stuck in. It's the fashion, after all. People shouldn't smoke, why treat their cancer? Poor people shouldn't have more children, why pay child benefit? Brexit voters are bigots, why listen to them? We judge reality so that we don't have to experience reality.

That reality, that we judge and that Christ experiences? The human reality is need.

And what will be left, when we have finished recasting every situation to suit ourselves, is need.

And need is how Christ comes into the world. God sends an angel to Joseph, an angel to Mary. He says - there is this need. A world literally dying from lack of love. Will you meet the need? And they say: yes. Though it will mean scorn and opprobrium,

losing their moral bearings, losing the life they knew. Yes. To this anarchic God who doesn't know anything about rules. Only need. And yes.

At Advent we remember our Christian vocation to wait. Watchful, at all times, for what? For when we become Mary and Joseph. For when God says 'You, now, bring Christ to life. Not how you were planning. This way.' And we reply? No. Too tired, too busy, too selfish, too - asleep. A hundred times a day. No incarnation. We stopped it.

And a hundred times, every hour, every day, new need, a new chance to bring Christ to life. Am I the righteous man in today's psalm, are you? Clean hands and pure heart, who desires not worthless things? No way. But God doesn't care, there isn't time. The need is now, and now, and now. The poor we have always with us, the lonely, the hurt, the despised. God takes any Christ-bearer he can get.

And makes - o marvellous! - new Nazareths  
in us/ Where she shall yet conceive/ Him,  
morning noon and eve. New Bethl'ems, and  
he born/There, evening, noon and morn.

Bethl'em or Nazareth. Have you seen them?  
Nazareth's a dump. Bethlehem's a warzone.  
And yet, by his presence, beautified,  
beatified, sanctified, glorified.

Now to him who by the power at work  
within us is able to accomplish abundantly  
far more than all we can ask or imagine, to  
him be glory in the church and in Christ  
Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever.  
Amen.