

December 6, 2009
The Quiet Ones of Christmas: Joseph
Matthew 1:18-25

Look back over the passage we just read. Look carefully at what Joseph says ...

Joseph says nothing. We have no record of any of Joseph's words. We could put words in his mouth ... but we do so at our own risk. We have no idea what the right words would be.

What we do hear, speaking loudly and clearly, are Joseph's actions. An old proverb goes, "*A picture is worth a thousand words.*" If that is true, then through glimpses of Joseph's life, we could hear thousands of thousands of wise words ... But then we only see a few snapshots of Joseph's life, too. What do we know?

Joseph: A Person of Integrity

Some wise pundit once said, "*The only exercise some people get is jumping to conclusions, running down their friends, side-stepping responsibility, and pushing their luck!*" Do you know someone like that? What do you think of that person, really? Do you trust them? Are they a close friend?

In contrast, Thomas Babington Macaulay observed, "*The measure of a man's real character is what he would do if he knew he never would be found out.*" Do you know someone who is the kind of person who would do the right thing, even if no-one ever knew about it? What do you think of that person? Do you trust them? Are they a close friend?

Which of those quotes describes Joseph?

Joseph doesn't have to say a word, but we can hear him - through his actions - saying loudly and clearly that he is a person of deep integrity. When he learns of Mary's pregnancy his first thought is to do what is right. He knows he is not the father. There is no way that he can follow through with the marriage (of course there is a whole divine dimension at work here which Joseph is not aware of, but we know). Joseph is doing what is right in the sight of the Lord and for Mary (she should marry the father of the child - remember Joseph doesn't know the truth yet). He is not concerned about his reputation. "*Be more concerned with your character than with your reputation,*" writes Steve Jamison. "*Character is who you really are. Reputation is what people say you are. Character is more important.*"

Joseph has the potential to do a lot of inappropriate things. But he acts in accordance with his values ...

Joseph: A Person of Compassion

Joseph could - in his heart of hearts he may even want to - publicly humiliate Mary. But he doesn't. Joseph is also a true gentleman. He is a person of compassion.

Again, Joseph says no audible words, but the picture of him not wanting to expose her to public disgrace speaks loudly of his compassion. Even though he must feel deeply hurt, betrayed, bitter, and angry - even though he probably wants to shout his anguish from the rooftops - Joseph thinks of Mary - her honour, her well-being - before his own.

Someone once advised me, that if you want others to be happy, be compassionate! If you want to be happy, be compassionate! It is true that when we bless other people with the gift of compassion, they receive a great gift. There is so much criticism, complaint and condemnation in the world, but compassion is a scarce commodity. But we also are blessed when we act in a compassionate way; we feel good! In contrast, when we blast someone - even if they deserve it - we inevitably don't feel good about it.

British pastor, Charles Spurgeon, once said, *"A good character is the best tombstone. Those who loved you and were helped by you will remember you when forget-me-nots have withered. Carve your name on hearts, not on marble."* Those whom I may have judged harshly, criticized, or torn down will certainly not remember me - fondly anyway! But those on whom I had compassion will remember (those of you who attended Bill Roycroft's funeral can attest to the power that a compassionate person can have on others' lives).

"Treat everyone with politeness, even those who are rude to you - not because they are nice, but because you are" (Anonymous). As a person of integrity, you do not take your cues on how to treat another person by how they have treated you. You need to be the leader in the relationship. You can choose to treat a person who is rude to you as graciously as you would a kindly person because that is the right thing to do. Compassion is a choice.

Joseph: A Person of God

Where did Joseph's values and his compassion come from? From his relationship with God. Joseph, as a Jewish man, had been raised in the faith of his people. But at some point his faith had gone beyond just knowing about God (a faith in his head) to become a personal knowing God (a faith in his heart). Joseph knows God well enough that he can recognize God's voice, even in a dream.

I don't know about you, but I find dreams rather tricky: I don't always trust what I think I hear in my dreams. But Joseph obviously has a close relationship with God. When the angel spoke, Joseph heard God's voice. And it wasn't a message he would have expected - or wanted - to hear.

How does Joseph handle "bad news"?

John Wooden, coach of the UCLA basketball team through 10 national championships in 12 years, writes of his hard times - when things didn't come together well: *"Early on I had come to believe that events in life usually work out as they should, for a reason, even if the reason is not apparent ... Those who prevail in a competitive environment (in life!) look adversity in the eye and say, 'Welcome.' Then they move ahead without complaint, excuse, or whining. It is inevitable in leadership and in life that events occur that seem utterly incomprehensible and unfair. While we can't control fate, we can control how we react to the hand we're dealt. Be a realistic optimist and remind yourself that things turn out best for those who make the best of how things turn out."*

Joseph made the best of how things were turning out rather than moaning about how things weren't turning out best! He did so because his "realistic optimism" was based on a conviction that ultimately *"God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them"* (Romans 8:28). Romans 8 does not promise that only good things will happen to us: far from it! If you read this verse in context, it flows out of a discussion about how we struggle with sin - every moment of every day; we may suffer in all sorts of ways; all of creation is messed up by sin; our bodies, this side of eternity, are letting us down ... so we look forward in hope. He introduces v.28, saying, *"We believers groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights ... including the new bodies he has promised us ... We must wait patiently and confidently ... And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness ..."* (Romans 8:23-26). Then, after describing all of this adversity that does happen in our lives, Paul reflects that God can bring something beautiful, even out of a train wreck: *"God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them"* (Romans 8:28). God does not cause the train wreck; but He can bring the beauty out of it!

Joseph displays an amazing peace through this whole incident - because he has found his strength in God. God can cause the most unlikely of circumstances to work for good.

Joseph: A Person who is There

Joseph is there for Mary. He is there for her in this beginning - difficult though it must have been to accept the angel's words. He is there for Mary in Bethlehem when the baby is born. Presence is a powerful thing.

As we reflected before communion, *"One test of a family's health: can they eat together? Family meals are at risk. The table can be a place where the preparation of food reflects mother's or father's care, and where parents and children can sit, enjoy, argue, joke,*

*listen, have their voice heard, attack and be attacked, but not walk out. Young couples prize a chance to enjoy a meal with their children. As work or other pressures increase, fast food and television can take over, and you find families who never eat together. In some parts of the world the children grab something from the fridge and 'graze', a can in one hand, fast food in the other, their eyes fixed on a TV screen. It is no accident that at the centre of the Christian family Jesus placed a meal, (Communion, the Lord's Supper), the Eucharist. It is round a common table that a family really lives together. Try to find a time, at least once a week, for slow food, not fast."*¹

How good are you at finding time for the people you love?

I heard an interview with a mortgage broker who was lamenting that most people spend far more time planning their vacation than their mortgage - but the vacation will last only a couple of weeks and cost only a few thousand dollars, while a mortgage can be 25+ years and cost tens of thousands of dollars. We might ask the question why we spend so much time on whatever-it-is in life is relatively trivial, and so little time on what will last us for decades of years of our lives: our relationships - with God, with our kids, with our parents, with our friends ... What's really more important: presence or presents?

Me: What Am I Saying?

When John Wooden graduated from a country school in Centreton, Indiana, his father gave him two dollars and a 3x5 card with "Seven Suggestions to Follow":

1. Be true to yourself (ethics and integrity, values and beliefs)
2. Help others (be compassionate)
3. Make each day your masterpiece (do your best, every day)
4. Drink deeply from the Good Book (God's word)
5. Make friendship a fine art
6. Build a shelter against a rainy day.
7. Pray for guidance, count and give thanks for your blessings every day.

Good advice? Absolutely. If someone were to write seven suggestions, based upon how you live, what would they write? Joseph's actions spoke louder than the words he may have actually said. Our actions speak louder than our words, too. What are we saying? What do our actions say about integrity? Compassion? Our relationship with God? Being There?

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