**7th December 2014**

**Matthew 1:18-25**

A woman takes her 16-year-old daughter to the doctor. The doctor says, "Okay, Mrs. Jones, what's the problem?"
The mother says, "It's my daughter Deirdre. She keeps getting these cravings, she's putting on weight and is sick most mornings."
The doctor gives Deirdre a good examination then turns to the mother and says, "Well, I don't know how to tell you this but your Deirdre is pregnant. About 4 months would be my guess."
The mother says, "Pregnant?! She can't be, she has never ever been left alone with a man! Have you Deirdre?"
Deirdre says, "No mother! I've never even kissed a man!"
The doctor walked over to the window and just stares out it. About five minutes pass and finally the mother says, "Is there something wrong out there doctor?"
The doctor replies, "No, not really, it's just that the last time anything like this happened, a star appeared in the east and three wise men came over the hill. I'm going to miss it this time!"

When Mary told Joseph that she was pregnant and that she had never kissed another man – I’m not sure that joseph would have been as sarcastic and humours as the doctor was with Deirdre!

In this week's reading of Matthew's gospel we are plunged into a scene worthy of EastEnders or The only way is Essex. We have a sex scandal.

Joseph hears the news that Mary is pregnant and he knows that he is not the father. What a scandal. What shame. Should he just walk away and leave her to these ridiculous claims that the child is the result of the Holy Spirit?

It's hard for us to imagine the full impact of learning such a fact in that society. Today, unwed mothers are common, and pregnant brides are not exactly rare. But this was worse. Your girl, your fiancée, is preganat and you are not the father. Put yourselves in Josephs shoes – what would you do? For Joseph, the “righteous” thing to do, according to law and custom, would have been to dismiss Mary, refuse to honour the commitment he had made, and condemn her to life-long shame. He could have felt very self-righteous doing so.

We too often forget about poor Joseph and the vital role he plays. . Matthew in his gospel describes him as a carpenter (13.55) or a craftsman. A small town carpenter he lives in Nazareth: an insignificant town on the edge of boredom and obscurity. Doesn’t God have better options? An eloquent priest from metropolitan Jerusalem, or a scholar from the Pharisees perhaps?

Why Joseph? A major part of the answer perhaps lies in his reputation: which he gives up for Jesus. So we read in verse 19: ‘Being a man of principle and at the same time wanting to save her from exposure, Joseph made up his mind to have the marriage contract quietly set aside.’

With the phrase ‘a man of principle’ Matthew recognises the status of Joseph. Nazareth viewed him as might an elder, a Sunday school teacher. He was an upstanding individual in the community. Joseph likely took pride in his standing, but Mary’s announcement ‘I’m pregnant’ now jeopardized it.

It is a great joy to receive five new members of this church this morning. In this day and age it is a minor miracle that people come to church and secondly want to commit themselves to the church’s work and wittiness. One of the reasons that many people give for why they don’t want to join a church is because they don’t feel they are good enough, or they believe they would be exposed as a hypocrite and a failure to live up to the Christian ideals.

Just this week Myles Bradbury, a cancer specialist who abused 18 boys in his care at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge, has been jailed for 22 years. He was described on the news as ‘a churchgoer and scout leader’. I’m sure Myles Bradbury had been involved in other organisations and had other past-times but the use of only those descriptions gave the impression that he tried to present himself as an upstanding individual in the community when he was secretly a child abuser. Fancy that – and he was a churchgoer!

Joseph is a ‘man of principle’ yet Matthew includes in his account of the birth of Jesus the accusation that Mary has been caught in adultery. She has got herself pregnant, outside of marriage, and by someone who is not her fiancée. It is a huge scandal.

It is not for nothing that Christian art throughout the centuries has concentrated on the annunciation scene to Mary. Whereas Luke in his gospel concentrates on the annunciation that happened to Mary, Matthew concentrates on the announcement to Joseph. You probably have no trouble imagining an annunciation scene to Mary from its consistent portrayal in Christian art. Can you recall one painting of an annunciation to Joseph? Why has the golden luminosity of those angelic daytime annunciations to Mary never matched by the mysterious darkness of an angelic nightmare annunciation to Joseph? Luke’s annunciation to Mary has wiped out completely Matthew’s to Joseph in Christian imagination.

Is it because we want to forget the scandals and the shame and gloss over them. Particularly if those scandals are about sex.

The most striking feature of this annunciation to Joseph, that I have never realised until writing his sermon, is that the announcement came after Mary had become pregnant. Last week, when we looked at the annunciation to Mary, the angel told her the news that she had been chosen to give birth to Jesus **before** she conceived. Mary was able to agree to the plan: ‘let it be to me according to your word’. In Matthews’s annunciation Joseph is told **after** Mary has conceived. It begs the huge question ‘why didn’t God send an angel to Joseph, like he sent one o Mary, before the conception to tell Joseph the plan? That could have save him from this moral dilemma and questioning Mary’s faithfulness? Why did God put Joseph through that agony?

His fiancée is blemished, tainted…. He is righteous, godly. On the one hand, he has the law. On the other hand he has love. The law says, stone her. Love says forgive her. Joseph is caught in the middle.

The Old Testament law in Deuteronomy chapter 22 specifically said that women and indeed men, caught in the act of adultery should be stoned to death. Some countries in the world still enact this law. In John’s gospel, chapter 8 a woman is caught in the act of adultery is brought before Jesus and the teachers of law try to trap him. They say the law demands that she should be stoned. The law is formal and the defenders of morality want to see justice done. Jesus famously says to them that those who are without sin should cast the first stone and everyone leaves in silence. Whereupon he turns to the woman and does not condone her sin but neither does he condemn her? Instead he says ‘go and sin no more’. Jesus does not carry out the full prescription of the law. Instead he scorns those who are moralistic and yet so lacking in shame for themselves. He offers a second chance to the adulterous woman, whilst at the same time naming her conduct as sin.

In the Muslim tradition there is a similar incident when Muhammad is in the oasis of Khayber. Some Jews bring before him a woman caught in the act of adultery; she is one of their people. They ask him what they should do. Mohammed calls for a copy of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Since it is formally stated there that an adulteress should be stoned, he orders her to be stoned. Obedience to the Law comes before everything is the interpretation of Mohammed.

Should Joseph, ‘the man of principle’ obey the law? Yet at the same time he has some affection towards Mary – because he wants to save her from exposure. A man of principle: but also a man of compassion. He arrives at a compromise. He will have the marriage contract quietly set aside. He will not see the law through, but he will attempt to salvage some of his reputation and principles. A reasonable decision – you may agree?

Then comes the angel in a dream. Mary’s growing belly gives no cause for concern, but reason to rejoice. ‘She carries the Son of God in her womb’ the angel announces. But who would believe it?

Joseph still faces a dilemma. Make up a lie and preserve his place in the community and his reputation, or tell the truth, get laughed at and kiss his reputation goodbye.

As we know he makes the later decision. He takes Mary home to be his wife, but had no intercourse with her until her son was born. And he named the child Jesus’.

 Joseph swapped his reputation for a pregnant fiancée and an illegitimate son and made the big decision of discipleship. He placed God’s plan ahead of his own. He put God’s compassion before his own feelings.

Jesus would do the same. Like father like son. Jesus would have a good parental male role model in Joseph. A man of grace and mercy, a man who was not bothered with his reputation but was more bothered with doing what he believed God was calling him to do.

Joseph, in following the way of God, died to his reputation. Jesus said anyone who wants to follow me, must die to self, take up their cross and follow me. (Matthew 16.24) As we have seen in the story of the annunciation to Joseph – that is never easy

Joseph could have taken the path of pretence and denial but he didn’t

Too many people are mired in pretence and denial. There is a lot of pretence and denial about sexuality. We pretend things aren’t happening but they do. There is a lot of pretence and denial about the economy – how we are in debt, how to get out of it, do you make colossal cuts or not – who really pays for those cuts? We do our best to apply plasters to the wounds right under our noses, with our food banks and other charities. But we refuse to see the systemic problems. There is pretence and denial in churches. We pretend that everything is going to be OK when perhaps there are real problems. Can Joseph's clear view of reality call us to open our eyes and act upon the revelations we have received?

Dreams made a difference in this story. Reason would have ended in Joseph walking away from Mary.

One of the greatest gifts you can give this year is to believe in someone's dreams. The greatest gift you can give is to have faith in someone else; believe in their dreams. Believe in the dreams of the person you love. Believe in the dream of your husband. Believe in the dream of your wife. Believe in the dreams of your children. Often we scoff and ridicule people’s dreams – it will never happen – you can’t do that. Can we be open to how God maybe working through people, inspiring them with new dreams and visions for the way ahead?

Matthew's narrative doesn't record a single word from Joseph, in marked contrast to Luke's record of Mary's “Let it be with me according to your word.” Joseph just acts upon the revelation received in his dream.

Joseph faced a real dilemma – a scandal that brought shame to him and Mary and threatened his reputation and future. Sooner or later, every one of us comes up against tough moments in life, and we have to face big problems. Dr. J. A. Hadfield, noted British psychologist, commented on this when he said, "When people run up against life and find it too much for them, one swears, one gets a headache, one gets drunk, and one prays"

When life gets hard, what do you do? Do you give up? Do you swear? Do you lash out in hostility? Do you try to find someone to blame? Do you give in to bitterness? Do you run away? Do you hide behind some illness? Do you drug yourself? Or, do you pray? Do you consider the problem prayerfully and then listen for God? That's what Joseph did, and it worked.

What a great lesson to learn from Joseph: the art of listening! Maybe this is why Jesus went often into the wilderness alone to do some praying and listening. Perhaps he learned from father Joseph how to listen for God's will. Joseph was big enough to listen and big enough not just to think about his own reputation.

May God give us courage and perception to listen for his call in those times of tension, decision, dilemma, even scandal and shame. And in those times, may we know the friendship of the one who came to us as Emmanuel – God with us.