

## Advent 4 Year A (2007)

### Matthew 1:18-25

When the BBC decided to make a television series out of the search for a young man to play Joseph in Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, the choice of the title was probably easy. Any Dream Will Do is a nice catchy phrase, just as it's a nice catchy song. Joseph, in the book of Genesis, is a dreamer. He is also an interpreter of dreams. And whilst we might assume that his ability applies to any dream at all, we're foolish if we don't notice that the dreams he has in the Bible, and the dreams he interprets, have very particular consequences. It is not the content of the dream or its interpretation which is significant, so much as that which God is doing through these dreams and their meanings. Being a dreamer in the Bible means hearing the Word of the Lord, a Word whose consequences are just as likely to be suffering as glory. In fact, Joseph's honesty in telling his brothers of the dream in which their sheaves of corn bow down to his, leads to him being cast out: his brothers don't for a moment doubt that this dream is a sign of Joseph's future greatness and lordship over them, and they begin to plot against him.

The Joseph we heard of this morning is also a dreamer. Unlike the infancy narrative in Luke's gospel, the story Matthew tells is almost all

about Joseph, and it's a story of central importance for the evangelist, because it sets out right at the start of his narrative the central question of Matthew's gospel - who is this Jesus of Nazareth?

By Matthew's time rabbinic reflection on the Hebrew Bible had led some to talk of prophetic dreams experienced by the parents of Moses, the future deliverer of Israel. The first two chapters of Matthew give us *in nuce* the picture which his whole gospel will display - Jesus is the new and the greater Moses, who gives not just law but life. Small wonder, then, that he is conceived by the "holy spirit" - the creative agency of God which brought life out of nothing at the beginning of the Bible itself. Matthew wants us to think of Joseph the dreamer, but also of Moses the deliverer. After the child is born a wicked king - Herod, the new Pharaoh - will try to do away with the children of Israel, but the new Moses will escape, only to return and deliver. The dreams of his father will be essential in these adventures. The story of which Joseph is a part is a story of divine initiative, of God breaking into a seemingly human story and turning it upon its head.

And the content of his message is not simply prophetic. It is also dangerous, even scandalous. Again, we're reminded of the patriarch Joseph, whose dream of the sheaves turned the familial hierarchy on its

head. Here the implication is the more outrageous. Take his unmarried mother as your wife. Ignore not just convention, but your own gut instincts. Surrender these to the control of something, someone else. Trust, in other words, in your dream. How many of us would do anything remotely similar, something self-denying, self-humiliating, self-scandalizing? Joseph has no idea what is going on, and can and will see no evidence whatsoever that this bizarre dream is truly a thing of God. But he trusts.

What God seeks by his words is faith and trust, not social conformity. The first seventeen verses of Matthew, his genealogy, has already left us in no doubt. Though it would have been no fun for the deacon to sing, I wish the lectionary had given us the genealogy this morning. What most people think is a boring list of who begat whom is actually a remarkable family tree in which only four women are mentioned - Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba and Ruth: two harlots, an adulterer and a breaker of ethnic law. In keeping with the extraordinary nature of this line of descent, the critic Michael Goulder comments on the passage thus:

Exceedingly odd,  
Is the means by which God  
Has provided our path  
to the heavenly shore:  
Of the girls from whose line  
The true light was to shine

There was one an adulteress,  
one was a whore.  
There was Tamar who bore –  
What we all should deplore –  
A fine pair of twins  
to her father-in-law;  
And Rahab the harlot,  
Her sins were as scarlet,  
As red as the thread which she hung  
from the door;  
Yet alone of her nation  
She came to salvation,  
And lived to be mother  
of Boaz of yore;  
And he married Ruth,  
A Gentile uncouth,  
In a manner quite counter  
to biblical law;  
And of her there did spring  
Blessed David the King  
who walked on his palace one evening,  
and saw  
The wife of Uriah,  
From whom he did sire  
A baby that died,  
oh, and princes a score.  
And a mother unmarried  
It was too that carried  
God's son, and him laid  
in a cradle of straw,  
That the moral might wait  
At the heavenly gate  
While the sinners and publicans  
go in before,  
Who have not earned their place  
But received it by grace,  
And have found them a righteousness  
not of the Law.

To break into a poem in the midst of a work of Biblical scholarship is not quite the done thing. Neither is marrying a pregnant teenage girl. A sermon by the late lamented Fr Herbert McCabe of Blackfriars in this parish put it perfectly: “Jesus did not belong to the nice clean world of Mary Whitehouse or to the honest, reasonable world of *The Observer* or *The Irish Times*, he belonged to a family of murderers, cheats, cowards, adulterers and liars” This is the family of which Joseph and Jesus will form a part. God is not interested in convention. Jesus is the one who will save people from their sins, not the one who will bless the tidy self-concerned little world which you and I find it so easy to relax into. To very many people, Christmas is a time of home comforts, but Matthew would tell us Advent is a time of home truths, home truths which come together in one truth. And as it was for Joseph it’s a truth of which we can only dream.