

Faithful Joseph.

Christmas – it's not over until the Old Man sings Nunc Dimittis (that's Simeon at Candlemas, 2nd February). But there's another man, traditionally middle-aged or old, who doesn't get much recognition in Nativity Plays or Carol Services, compared to Shepherds, Wise Men, Herod or even the Innkeeper (not mentioned in the Gospels), and that's St Joseph, foster-father of Jesus.

But this Christmas felt different. As the Lectionary returned to Year A, many of the Readings were from St Matthew's gospel, whose early chapters look at the birth of Jesus from Joseph's viewpoint. And the musical focus of the Carol Service at St David's Church was a vivid new poem by Richard Skinner, imaginatively set to music by Nigel Walsh.

**Journey's end, and weary Joseph
halts before his kinsman's door;
on his donkey's back is Mary,
close to tears and saddle-sore.
"I am of the house of David!"
Joseph cries, "so let us in!"
But the upper room is crowded,
travellers all, and all are kin.**

*Oh faithful Joseph, don't despair,
for in the silence of the night
the Child that Mary chose to bear
is Jesus, God's own saving light;
Christ Jesus, God's redeeming light.*

**Joseph pleading, Mary weeping,
shelter for the pair is found:
hens and straw and drowsy cattle,
beaten earth and muddy ground.
Mary aching, Joseph guarding,
as upon the straw she lies,
knowing that her time is coming,
waiting for a baby's cries.**

*Oh faithful Joseph, don't despair,
for in the silence of the night
the Child that Mary chose to bear
is Jesus, God's own saving light;
Christ Jesus, God's redeeming light.*

**Long the night and long the labour,
will the baby never show?
Women from the house now helping
as the birth-pangs come and go.
Menfolk hang around with Joseph
to distract him with their chat:**

census, Romans, occupation,
livestock prices, this and that.

*Oh faithful Joseph, now give praise,
for in the silence of the night
the Child that Mary's called to raise
is Jesus, God's own saving light;
Christ Jesus, God's redeeming light.*

Dawn is breaking, baby's feeding,
Mary broods on what's ahead;
Joseph by the door is watching
as the eastern sky turns red;
what the future holds is hidden:
Joseph knows he cannot say;
baby cries but Mary's sleeping;
visitors are on their way.

*Oh faithful Joseph, don't despair,
for in the silence of the night
the Child that Mary chose to bear
is Jesus, God's own saving light;
Christ Jesus, God's redeeming light.*

The first time I've sung 'livestock prices' – but why not!

'Upper room full' is as good a translation of Luke's Greek as 'no room at the Inn'. The same word is used for the venue of the Last Supper, room enough then and Jesus the Host. But at his birth there was no room for the God of all creation, except (in today's terms) in the kitchen or utility room, the Lord of Absolution laid in a washing basket.

Joseph is patient, protective, proud of Mary and Jesus. Joseph's 'Fear not' messages from angels are a tough set of challenges, his perseverance an example if we feel confused or short-changed by God.

This new song was paired with 'O Sapientia: in honor of St Joseph', a poem by Madeleine L'Engle (1918-2007), readily found on-line.

It was from Joseph first I learned
of love. Like me he was dismayed.
How easily he could have turned
me from his house; but, unafraid,
he put me not away from him.
(O God-sent angel, pray for him).
Thus through his love was Love obeyed.

**The Child's first cry came like a bell:
God's Word aloud, God's Word in deed.
The angel spoke: so it befell,
and Joseph with me in my need.
O Child whose father came from heaven,
to you another gift was given,
your earthly father chosen well.**

**With Joseph I was always warmed
and cherished. Even in the stable
I knew that I would not be harmed.
And, though above the angels swarmed,
man's love it was that made me able
to bear God's love, wild, formidable,
to bear God's will, through me performed.**

Here Mary's love for Joseph has an intimacy often denied or ignored. Having restored Joseph's position in the Nativity, I realised that, apart from Mary herself, there are no females in the Christmas narrative.

That's not quite true - it is framed by encounters with two strong women. The Visitation to Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist, where Mary sings her manifesto of praise & social justice, the Magnificat. And the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, where aged Anna prophesies and Simeon prays the other Evensong Cantic, the Nunc Dimittis. Which brings us back to Candlemas.



Richard Barnes – 23/01/20.

