**Matthew 1:18-25**

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah happened. His mother Mary was engaged to marry Joseph. But before they married, he learned that she was expecting a baby. (She was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit.) Mary’s husband, Joseph, was a good man. He did not want to cause her public disgrace, so he planned to divorce her secretly.

But after Joseph thought about this, an angel from the Lord came to him in a dream. The angel said, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to accept Mary to be your wife. The baby inside her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son. You will name him Jesus. Give him that name because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this happened to make clear the full meaning of what the Lord said through the prophet: “The virgin will be pregnant and will give birth to a son. They will name him Immanuel.” (Immanuel means “God with us.”)

When Joseph woke up, he did what the Lord’s angel told him to do. He married Mary. But Joseph did not live with her until her son was born. And he named him Jesus.

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

It’s been a funny old Advent: we started off with the Patriarchs, and then we had Prophets (but it was mostly John the Baptist), then in week three we had John the Baptist again but in his own right this time, and finally we are at week 4 of Advent and it is the Blessed Virgin Mary’s week. But this gospel is at least as much about Joseph as it is about Mary.

There’s a lovely quote from Through the Looking Glass by Lewis Carroll that comes from a conversation between Alice and the White Queen, in which the Queen claims to be one hundred and one, five months and a day. "I can't believe that!" said Alice.
"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."
Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one *can't* believe impossible things."
"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day.  **Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.**"

And here is Joseph, being asked to believe just one impossible thing: namely that his wife-to-be is with child by the Holy Spirit. Christianity has sometimes found it a bit difficult to know what to do with Joseph; he is always slightly stage left, rather than central – not helped of course by the fact that he disappears from view entirely after Jesus’ childhood. As the carol says: Joseph was an old man. There is, though, one lovely – possibly medieval – depiction of Joseph holding the baby while Mary is asleep in the straw. That, and the fact that he went ahead with his relationship with Mary suggests he was indeed a man of modern thought.

And then Joseph is gone, as I said – not even a bit-part player in Jesus’ public ministry. Yet, but for Joseph, we surely wouldn’t have the Jesus we got. Mary bore him, but Joseph named him. It was only because of the generosity and hospitality of Joseph that the family was willing and able to receive Jesus as a gift.

In fact, the more we look at it, the more we see what an important figure Joseph is. Faced with a pregnant fiancée, with his name about to be dragged through the mud and with his future apparently ruined, Joseph still said ‘yes’. He was being asked to believe that God was present – and active - in this whole mess – and he did. Today’s gospel ends with him trusting that, in the midst of a lifetime he **had** not chosen for himself and **would not** have chosen for himself, and full of problems, none of which he could have anticipated, and which he didn’t deserve, he is nevertheless willing to trust that God is at work, and believes that God is present.

And surely the same can be true of us: in the disappointments and anguishes and difficulties of our own lives, we can hold and manage those rough patches if we trust that God is present and active, as He was for Joseph.

It is Matthew’s gospel that records all our references to Joseph – including, remember, Joseph rescuing the family from Herod. Which he did because he had paid attention to a second significant dream at the point at which Herod was seeking this new baby King out in order to kill him for the threat he posed to Herod himself.

So we only know about Joseph’s involvement through Matthew. And Joseph is an example to us, which we can relate to, either as parents ourselves, or by knowing people who are parents. That whole precarious, excited, uncertain, apprehensive time when you are waiting for checks and scans and hospital visits is in many ways no different from the emotions experienced by Joseph and Mary waiting for this extraordinary baby.

One of the ways in which we can approach and appreciate Christmas is to ask ourselves: how has the birth of Jesus turned **our** lives upside down in the way that it turned their lives upside down and in the way the births of our own children shook our lives up.

We can sometimes feel that this isn’t the life we would have chosen for ourselves – failed student, divorced, career ground to a halt too soon … and we can feel: this wasn’t what I set out to do. Number three son, Calum, first wanted to be a vet and then decided to pursue a career in medicine, but failed to secure a place at university despite a whole sackful of As and A\*s at GSCE and A Level. But if he had gone down that route, he wouldn’t now be living in Sweden, doing a job he loves, and with a lovely (I don’t know yet but I will meet her in a few days 😊) American girlfriend who also works for a Swedish company. Funny how things turn out. Perhaps because whatever we perceive as mess is actually material for God’s action.

What is your mess? And where is God at work in it? May it be blessed by God’s action and presence as we move inexorably and at high speed now towards the incarnation of the Christ. **Amen**