

## **Joseph the Introvert: Inside Out turning the World Upside Down**

Matthew 1:17-25

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**We are, in the Yates household, a seriously extraverted group.** Carl, in particular is an off the scale extravert. For us everything is processed externally. We get our energy from being with people. It is a kind of outside-in process. Introverts on the other hand, process things internally, kind of inside-out. They can find it very energy draining to be with people. Being strong extraverts, Carl and I make sure that when people stay with us, they can get away from us. There is a bedroom downstairs for that purpose. I feel sorry for introverts when they are trapped with us in cars. When introverts travel with us for long journeys I often wonder whether they have to take days off of work in order to recover.

**I read this scripture passage every year.** Every year, the same non-profound thought comes to me; using the Myers Briggs Personality Type Indicator, Joseph must have been a big time introvert. We don't know much about him. He does not speak much in scripture; in fact he scarcely speaks at all. He always seems to be thinking, pondering. In terms of the really big decisions, he processes them in such a deeply internal way, that even God has to converse with Joseph internally – through the man's subconscious, his dreams.

**We don't hear much about Mary in the gospel of Matthew.** She is just kind of "there." We do hear about Mary in the gospel of Luke, where she is apparently a big time extravert. What does she do after she finds out she's pregnant? She goes *visiting!* She makes the journey to visit her cousin Elizabeth, pregnant in her old age. What does Mary do when greeted by her cousin? She responds with the most eloquent, passionate of speeches in which she lays out how God is going to change the world through her baby. The world, she sings, will be turned upside down and inside out. That Mary, heart on her sleeve for whoever will listen. Mary, like her son, seems to find herself at an awful lot of parties. John, in fact, begins his gospel with an account of mother and son attending a wedding party in which the wine runs out. Mary knows what this means for hosts and guests alike. She approaches her son, "Jesus, do something. A nice merlot, perhaps?" Indignant, Jesus tells her it is too early to be showing the world what he can do. Mary knows her son. She tells the servants to go fetch the water jugs anyway. Merlot, it will be. Jesus got the glory, but it was Mary's appreciation for the lubrication of human social interaction that set the whole thing into play. She is a people person. Joseph? Not so much. We don't know if he was even there. I suspect he was not one for the wedding party circuit. Perhaps he stayed home and made the wedding gift, a nice wine rack perhaps.

**I am really grateful to the writer of the gospel of Matthew for those important glimpses into the life of Jesus' Dad, Joseph.** Step Dad really. Joseph adopts Jesus as his own. It is an important thing as it is through Joseph's lineage that Jesus gets his claim

to be of the family of Abraham and David, according to the writer of Matthew, (1:1-16). In our passage today, Joseph has a really tough decision to make. Being Joseph, he doesn't talk to anybody about it. His betrothed is pregnant. This is a really big problem for a whole bunch of reasons. A betrothal is a legal bond. It is not like how we understand engagement in our own culture. Marriage was a two step process in those days. There was betrothal and then a marriage ceremony. The only way to break a betrothal was through divorce. Furthermore, a woman who has had an affair during the betrothal is guilty of adultery which could be considered a capital crime. Joseph doesn't know much about the whole circumstances of Mary's pregnancy— but he knows one thing for sure, he is not the father. What to do, what to do.

**We are told Joseph is a righteous man *and* unwilling to expose her to public disgrace.** This is Joseph's main problem. He is stuck between the two moral imperatives. You see, being righteous is not the same thing as being kind or nice or merciful. Being righteous means he is a guy who does the "right" thing according to the law. If Joseph was truly a righteous man, then he must have been tortured indeed, because the right thing would be to expose Mary as an adulterous woman – to let her have her punishment. Joseph, the righteous man, does a decidedly unrighteous thing – he resolves to quietly put her away. Joseph chooses mercy. Mercy is that most dangerous of courses of action. Nothing turns the world on its ear, upside down, inside out and backwards - like mercy.

**It is a choice that makes Joseph unrighteous.** It is also a choice that could totally ruin his life. The world of the ancient Roman Empire was an intricately stratified one that was defined by shame and honour. It was a system permeated with anxiety. Everyone had a patron above them and had people for whom they were patrons below them. Every single decision you made had to consider whether it brought shame or honour upon your patron and his patron above him and so on. At the very top of such a system was Caesar and of course, above Caesar were the ultimate in patrons – the gods. The Deity was the patron of all things. Throughout the Middle East, this shame/honour dynamic defined life from the tiniest of aspects. To choose not to report a woman who had been in adultery was to risk bringing dishonour upon oneself, ones family and ones patrons. To then decide after receiving direction in a dream to marry a woman pregnant with another's child would be sure to bring disrepute, dishonour upon him, his family, his business and upon whomever were his patrons. So, from the very beginning, as an embryo, Jesus' life is marked by another man's mercy and willingness to risk turning his world upside down from the inside out.

**There is a real backward-forward movement in this story.** It is true that Matthew's genealogy assures us that Jesus is of the line of David because of Joseph's family history. However, there are four women in this genealogy too. Four very interesting women. One might even say, four shocking women. There is Tamar who was forced to prostitute herself at least once; Rahab who is an unrepentant sex worker; Bathsheba taken by David in adultery; and Ruth, beguiler of Boaz. All of these women of questionable sexual history were ancestresses of Jesus. No shy, unknown women these. Now, added to this list is Mary, a woman pregnant before marriage. Pregnant, Virgin Mary. At least we are

told she is a virgin **until** she has Jesus. There is nothing said to indicate how old Joseph is. He is likely of marriageable age, in his twenties perhaps. Tradition tells us he is old. That is just because we want to think he did not have sex with Mary after Jesus is born. Of course they have sex. Matthew tells us they do. “He took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her **until** she had born a son: and he named him Jesus.”

Joseph received that name in a dream. Soon, like Joseph of the Old Testament who fled to Egypt after receiving a dream, Jesus’ step-Dad Joseph will receive similar instructions. Off he goes. Family, friends, business, patrons, all abandoned in order to keep a child, not of his own flesh, safe.

**We need men like Joseph.** We have always needed them. Oh, how we need them now. Many of you are men like Joseph. You are men who choose mercy over righteousness and reputation. Men who listen for the voice of God in strange and unusual places. Men who live out God’s grace. Men who live out gentleness in strength and strength in gentleness.

**I am thinking today of elephants.** There was a story a number of years ago about the elephants running amok. In Southern Africa as humans encroached on elephant territory the interaction between the two species became more problematic. Elephants were destroying crops and creating general mayhem. Elephants live in matriarchal groups. As young bulls mature into adolescents, they are encouraged to leave the herd. The natural resources people decided to cull the old bulls because too many elephants were sharing too few grazing areas. It was thought that so many males were not needed: they tended to be large, cranky and eat a lot. After the cull, things were expected to improve. In fact, they worsened dramatically. Not only did crop damage exacerbate, but the elephant-human contact became lethal. Property damage and aggression became extreme. What biologists came to realize is that those old bulls gathered with the young bulls and taught them how to behave. Suddenly they were gone. Young elephants were running amok and still have not recovered from the cull.<sup>1</sup> There are many other examples in animal world.

**We humans need contact with good males when we are young.** Young males in particular need mentoring by merciful men so they can become strong in gentleness and gentle in their strength. William Barclay claims that writer of Matthew places Jesus’ cradle in the shadow of the cross.<sup>2</sup> We can see this in our story today. Joseph himself prefigures what God will do. In the honour/shame exchange of Jesus’ era, to be crucified on the cross, a criminal’s death is to be dishonoured in the worst kind of way. That this dishonour came at the hands of the machination of empire with nary the finger of any friend or follower lifted to help him is an indictment of immense proportions. The followers of Christ recognized him as the child of God, the ultimate patron. They waited. According to common sense and to the rules, If God was righteous; **there should have**

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<sup>1</sup> I could not find the original article recalled from several years ago. However, the following link gives a very good overview of this problem.

<http://www.africanconservation.org/forum/african-tales/7755-an-elephant-crackup.html>

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: Chapters 1-10*, Westminster, John Knox Press, 2001, p. 38

**been a whole lot of smiting going on.** What happens? According to the gospels the usual standards of righteousness are turned upside down, inside out, backwards and forward. In the horrific death on the cross, we are forgiven. God is merciful. This is against all standards of proper appropriate action for the ultimate of patrons. Thus, the whole honour/shame system is *blown up*. God is merciful. Humankind is forgiven and infinitely loved. We are forgiven and infinitely loved. More than that: we are promised resurrection alongside Christ, the crucified one.

**It makes no sense. But then, nothing that really matters ever does.** And Joseph, big time introvert, unreasonably merciful man, step father of Jesus knew that too.