

Joseph - Remembering God's Promise

Reflection on Matthew 1:18-25

“Dreamer, you know you are a dreamer...”

Do you remember this song by Supertramp? It was written in 1975.
I was thirteen then.

“Dreamer, you know you are a dreamer...”

...and a little later in the song it says:

“I said dreamer, you are nothing but a dreamer... stupid little dreamer...”

This song is about a guy with big dreams who is incapable of acting on them, so they never come true.

But isn't there something very wrong with calling a dreamer “just” a dreamer, or “nothing but a dreamer”? Isn't there also something wrong when we think that dreams must come true and only then are they worth anything?

Don't dreams connect us with God and his kingdom, with God and his dream of a better world - no matter whether they come true or not? Don't dreams help us to stay alive when times are hard? Don't dreams nourish our hopes and hold us when things seem to go terribly wrong?

“Dreams must be dreamed so that what has to happen can happen”, I read in an article on our Bible text today.

Dreams of peace and justice, and a better world, must be dreamed so that what has to happen – peace, justice, and a better world – can happen...

For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice for ever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress..., says God.

And dreamers listen to such things. Dreamers are people who listen to voices and angels... And dreamers are people who make new things possible, who save life and enable new beginnings...

Such a dreamer is the Joseph of our Christmas narratives.

Joseph's dreams must be dreamed so that the saviour of humankind can be born and remain safe. As easy as that...

The circumstances of Joseph's future marriage were significantly less than ideal. The year they got betrothed, Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant.

How?

By whom?

Who could possibly believe Mary's absurd claim that the "Holy Spirit" had made her pregnant?

How dumb did she think he was?

How devastated Joseph must have been as he wrestled with his hurt and anger over what he assumed was her unfaithfulness, and the betrayal of all his hopes and dreams for marriage. And yet, he attempted to do "the honourable thing." He planned to end the engagement quietly, so as not to draw negative attention to her, but certainly also not to his own embarrassment.

Because honestly...

How to tell family and friends why the engagement was suddenly off?

How does one explain, after all, that he has been cheated on by God?

What do we do when our dream for the future suddenly ends, with no satisfactory explanation?

I remember the hurt and pain a very close friend of mine felt when a long and deep relationship came to an end. Gone were the golden hopes for a future of shared companionship, dashed were the dreams of fulfilment, back was her painful loneliness, gone and dead the images of a joy-filled future. Over and over again, it seemed that she would meet the "right" person only to experience hurt, anger, and betrayal when the relationship didn't develop to meet her expectations. She often felt "cheated on" by God — why wasn't God providing the wonderful person, the wonderful future, she dreamed of?

Perhaps Joseph felt the same.

What do we do when our dream for the future suddenly ends?

What do we do when the perfect job doesn't materialize, when all the time and energy and study we've invested into that particular career path is wasted?

What do we do when a marriage doesn't work out the way we hoped it would, and we are suddenly facing a divorce?

What do we do when our child falls prey to addiction, and we are made to face questions about our failures as parents?

What do we do when we develop cancer and our very life is under the threat of death?

In these difficult, painful moments of life we may feel, like Joseph... We may feel that we have been cheated on by God. If we are doing what we are supposed to, if we are following God the way we believe we are called to, life just shouldn't work this way, - this is what we tend to think, don't we?

But what about Joseph?

...in the very moment of his despair, God sends Joseph "the" dream.

Not just any dream.

Not just a dream of explanation.

God surrounds and embraces Joseph with God's own hopes for a glorious future, God's own great dream for humanity.
God's dream of a future when humanity is reconciled with a God who desperately loves God's own creation.

Through Jesus, God will transform the world itself.
Through Jesus, God will save His people from their sins.
God needs Jesus – no doubt.
And to save Jesus, God needs Joseph.
And the message, the promise, the dream that God gives Joseph then and each one of us now is: Jesus is Emmanuel. God is with us.

In his book, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes that “we all experience sadness, we all come at times to despair, and we all lose hope that the suffering in our lives and in the world will ever end” but, he continues,
“...there is no such thing as a totally hopeless case. Our God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos, and God can do so always, can do so now—in our personal lives and in our lives as nations, globally... Indeed, God is transforming the world now — through us — because God loves us.”

Joseph's life certainly didn't work out the way he had expected it would.
Joseph's life was totally and completely transformed; he'd given his consent to play a key role as father to God's own Son.
Joseph and Mary were given the monumental task of raising Jesus into the man he would become.
In order to live in God's dream, in order to play his role in God's story, Joseph had to be willing to give up some of his own dreams. Small as they were in comparison to God's. That surely was a painful process, full of uncertainty and full of the unknown.

But in the midst of the uncertainty, Joseph clung to the memory of the message God had given him, the promise of the glorious future which Joseph would help come into being.

God doesn't come to save our dreams; God gives us new dreams and by doing so he saves us.

When facing life's heartbreaking moments of loss and grief, what can save us is to remember.

...to remember God's promise that God is with us.

Remembering God's promise is not a passive acceptance of whatever happens to us.

Remembering God's promise is an active choice to trust that God will never abandon us, even in the moment of our greatest need.

Remembering allows us to let go of the illusion of control we have over our lives, and it gives us the strength to let go of our dreams and expectations in favour of God's great dream.

Remembering God's presence with us allows us to move forward without fear—even into an unknown future. It helps us to believe in dreams, to listen to God's voice, to save lives, and to enable new beginnings.

The world needs dreamers, not only in Advent but always. Amen.

Like Joseph

like Joseph
doing the job
building a house
like Joseph
choosing a wife
and expecting the child
like Joseph
listening to the angel
and being open to dreams
like Joseph
finding meaning even in the dark sides of life
like Joseph
not losing faith in all the contradictions
like Joseph
caring for Mary and the child
caring for the hope of the world
seeing the dangers
and facing what comes
leaving the friends and fleeing
like Joseph
staying in the foreign land and waiting
like Joseph
listening to God's call
and doing each day simply
what needs to be done