



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's readings

Romans 1: 1–7 (“Salutation”)

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Matthew 1: 18–25 (“The Birth of Jesus the Messiah”)

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

- 1 *I will enter his gates* (SP208)
- 2 *Fill your hearts with joy and gladness* (CH:103)
- 3 *Lo, he comes with clouds descending* (CH477)
- 4 *Make way, make way* (CH279)
- 5 *God is love, let heaven adore him* (CH123, Hyfrydol)

In the Name of the Father and of

The season of Advent: a time of waiting; a time of preparation. And over the next three weeks, as we wait for the birth of the Messiah, preparing for all sorts of things (some very spiritual, others perhaps less so) I would like us to focus on three vital characters from the Christmas story. This week we will turn our attention to Joseph; next week we will think about Mary; and finally, one fortnight from now we will look at just how Jesus entered the world. In this way, we will consider what the Church has come to know as “the Holy Family”, learning a little about the members of that family through historic works of art which cast light on the wonderful story of Christmas. These will be paintings that will certainly get us thinking.

And so to Joseph. When we consider this Nazarene carpenter, it can be very hard for us to know what to think. Joseph appears only in the Christmas stories of Matthew and Luke and in the one and only boyhood story. After that, he disappears. What this means is that we are left with a character surrounded by questions. What was his role, if any, in raising Jesus? How many of his woodworking skills, if any, did he pass on to the young boy? Above all, what misgivings might he have had concerning the strange family relationships which the Bible speaks of, where Jesus is born the Son of God, not the son of Joseph?

In mediaeval art, one of the themes which crops up in paintings of the Nativity is that of Joseph as an old first-time father and a simple-minded carpenter. It seems almost sacrilegious to depict so important a figure in that light, but the painters who did so knew exactly what they were doing. With church art being a great way to pass on the faith to people who couldn't read, it probably seemed appropriate to suggest that old Joseph didn't really matter: he simply would not have lived long enough to see Jesus embarking on his mission as an adult. Moreover, if Jesus is to be worshipped as the Son of God, it made perfect sense to convince the faithful that a figure like Joseph simply could not have played any part in the conception. Though grossly unfair, Joseph was thus quietly sidelined.

One artist who took a different view for a different age was John Everett Millais. In 1849 he set about painting a picture which, while scandalous in his day, would come to be much admired. “Christ in the House of his Parents” is a gloriously bright and attractive oil painting, rich in vibrant colours and bathed in sunlight. This romantic scene features six characters: Jesus and his second cousin, John (both shown as young boys); Mary and Joseph; Mary's mother (traditionally known as Anne) and an unnamed carpenter's assistant.

In Millais's Joseph we are introduced to the skilled and capable breadwinner of the family, seen working on a simple door. But why a door, rather than any other product of woodworking? Perhaps there is a hint coming our way that Joseph might have responsibility, not for a single door, but for two doors: one being raised from planks of wood, the other raised in flesh and blood: Jesus, the door to the Kingdom of God.

Joseph looks industrious and diligent, but we are aware that this workshop is not a high tech factory: it is a humble setting befitting a humble man and his family. It is fair to say that Joseph must have been a well-known figure in the local community because in Matthew chapter 13 we read of Jesus being described as “the carpenter's son”. And in a society in which an eldest son so often inherited his father's trade, it is possible that Joseph might have been a diligent teacher, showing Jesus how to master hammers and saws, lathes and planes. Unfortunately, as we will see, our painting tells of a day when things didn't go right for Joseph of Nazareth and the wee boy Jesus ...

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

“Ouch!” squealed Jesus. “My hand! A nail has made it bleed!”

“Poor soul,” said Mary, his mother, coming close to offer words of comfort. “We’ll soon get that seen to. John! John! Off you go to the kitchen and fetch a bowl of water for your cousin. Quick as you like, but mind you don’t spill. There’s a good boy.”

Meanwhile, granny was getting to the heart of the matter. “Och, would you look at that nasty old nail. Daddy should never have left it like that, should he?”

“Daddy,” muttered Joseph under his breath, “should never have let all the family into his workshop with blades and nails and splinters of wood all around. Oh well!”

The apprentice looked his boss in the eye and smiled gently. He knew that the family meant everything to Joseph. He had always thought Joseph had an extra special bond with his wife and, of course, young Jesus.

Just at that moment John, that very important water carrier, returned proudly, his task accomplished efficiently and effectively without a single drop of water having been spilled on the rough stone floor. A dove nestling by the sun-warmed wall cooed peacefully while the sound of the little flock of sheep could be heard through the open door.

“Don’t worry Jesus,” whispered Joseph calmly. “If you follow your father, you’ll end up with worse nail marks than that, but it’s all for a good cause ... all for a good cause.”

In her book, *The Art of Advent*, Jane Williams suggests that the symbolism of fatherhood was really important to Jesus. While others applied grand titles to the Maker of heaven and earth, Jesus chose to call God, “Abba”, which comes close to our notion of “Daddy”.

Williams thinks: “... the Gospels suggest that the heavenly Father took good care that Jesus should be watched over by a brave and loving earthly father ...”

It may very well be that Jesus, reflecting on his upbringing by Joseph, had a perfect image in his mind of all the good things that fatherhood could be, and was able to relate that to his heavenly Father. At the very least, we might hope with good reason that Jesus would have learned from Joseph a whole lot more than simply how to handle tools and timber.

In our day and age, it is well nigh impossible for us to grasp what a revolutionary painting this was for the straight-laced art lovers of the mid-19th century. They had been used to thinking of Jesus in the imagery of glorification, not in a messy old workshop with wood shavings on bare flagstones. Here, the boy is dressed in a very ordinary gown that looks alarmingly like a funeral shroud. As for Mary, she is far too plain to be the greatly honoured Mother of God, kissing her wee boy better like any ordinary mum. (And what about that scandalous red hair of Mother and Son, when everyone knows Jesus had fine blonde locks?)

There’s nothing quite like a work of art to get you thinking. Look at the breathtakingly ordinary humanity of Mary and of Joseph. Think about the link between John and the water he is carrying. The setsquare on the wall might even serve to remind us of Jesus, through whom the universe was made.

Then there is that white dove resting quietly just above the special child’s head: giving a sense of God’s Holy Spirit which will come down ... though not just yet. Lastly, what do you make of those sheep staring you in the eye? They are doing the same as us, looking in from outside. Indeed are they not our own reflection: the sheep of the Good Shepherd?

Here, then, is a painting whose scene may be domestic, yet whose scope is great enough to span the universe. Amen.

Praying for others

Gracious God,
as we witness a rise of positive Covid cases in East Lothian,
we pray for all those who are anxious and fearful,
that they may know your peace.

For those who are ill or in pain, please comfort and heal them and restore them to health.
For those who work to support, treat and nurture back to health those who are sick,
may you give renewed strength and hope.

Now that COP26 is over, may the work continue
to make this huge political meeting
a force for good in the fight against climate change.

May those who make up the personnel of the UK presidency
continue to encourage others around the world to turn promises into realities,
to turn the promises to phase out coal and to protect forests (and many other plans)
into genuine policies for change that will actually slow down global warming,
so that this generation does not hand down, to generations to come,
a depleted and weakened world.

In Jesus' name we pray,
Amen.



“Christ in the House of his Parents” (1850)
(John Everett Millais, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)