

Advent 4A
St. Matthew 1:18-25
December 18, 2016
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

A Family Season

Advent is finally a *family season*. It is that time when family and friends come together to commune and to celebrate the most important relationships in our lives.

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

We are so worried about what other people will think of us. How embarrassing. His betrothed is pregnant out of wedlock, and it isn't even his child. If this gets out, there will be a lot of shame in Nazareth.

In those days, the rules were pretty tough on women. Everything was *their fault!* Even if this child had been his, Joseph would have been in his rights to put away his betrothed for this embarrassing error, even though he might have had 50% of the responsibility. It was all about appearances. Imagine the difficult life Mary had in front of her, raising a child on her own as a single mother, in a society

where women had not place nor standing. Her options would shrink before her eyes. She faced a lifetime of judgment from others and the prospect of being shunned.

The text says that Joseph was faithful to the law, and so he would want to do the right thing as guided by the law, but he was also a man with a heart: listen to the words which described his feelings: *“Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”*

Joseph had compassion on Mary, even though he must have felt hurt and betrayed by the course of events, he loved her enough to protect her from the judgment of others. We can start to like him, instead of seeing him as a harsh, judgmental figure, with no regard for the feelings of others. He has some modicum of compassion, even in the midst of what must have been his own hurt.

That is an important characteristic of true friendship and true loyalty when it comes to families. Will they be with you through thick or thin, for better, for worse, as the vows say. Your real friends and family will be with you in the tough times, the embarrassing times, no matter what. Those who are not, take flight.

Your church family is a family to you. They are called to be there with you to celebrate your successes and achievements, births and birthdays, marriages as well as to be there in the difficult times, when you lose someone you love, no matter the reason. My experience of the St. George's church family confirms this. There is a special bond between us and I have seen it at work many times.

Advent is most of all a time to think about family and friends. It is a season of family, when the focus is our families. Who is my family? Who is my real true friend? Who do I care about still? Who still cares about me? To whom do I wish to send Christmas greetings? For whom shall I obtain presents?

Sometimes this is an easy list to prepare. At other times, we have to think about it and struggle with the definition of family. Blood, as they say, is thicker than water, and even when we find ourselves in broken family relationships from hurts and apparent betrayals, there is the blood which may motivate us to bridge the wide gaps and heal the breeches, as did Joseph so long ago.

Family, is about blood. Those ties are deep. This family at St. George's is about blood. We are also blood relatives. We are bonded together in the blood of the lamb, the blood of the God whose birth we celebrate in one week. Friends too, can be blood friends, like the young boys who mix a tiny drop of their blood to celebrate their new family relationships. What friend would not donate blood if it were needed for a close friend? Couldn't that be said of all of us?

Even single people have family: we all come from somewhere. And *no one is an island*, though sometimes it may feel that way. My parents are long gone. My aunts and uncles are also deceased. There is my son and his girlfriend. They are family. Being an only child, I learned long ago not to limit my sense of family to my biological one. Friends became my family, some close, and some what you might call distant cousins. But I have been richly blessed with this family of friends. I have also been blessed to be a part of this church family.

But our family is wider, Advent reminds us, then our families and friends. Humankind is our family, near and far. We are to care and love them also. The story of Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, reminds us of the *unseen people* in our lives, with whom we share a town, a city, or this ride on this planet, are our extend family. Christmass calls to us to live like this. To Scrooge's complement he was always a man of good business, Marley's ghost proclaims that "Mankind was my business."

Advent reminds us of what a large family we have indeed. Our Father, who art in heaven is not only my Father, but yours and everyone's I meet today and everyday. Advent is a time to get reoriented to our real family!

Jesus came to extend that family to you. That is at the heart of the meaning of the season. We are now blood relatives.

"They will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").
AMEN