

Along the track

Joseph 2: With a Father's Heart

From the brief details we hear in the two gospels we know that Joseph cared for his wife and son and in their care Jesus grew in age, grace and wisdom (Lk 2:51-52). It wasn't always easy.

After the joyful birth of their first son, albeit in difficult circumstances, this young family has to flee into a foreign country in fear of their lives. We don't hear how long they stayed in Egypt or when they returned but it is safe to assume that they sought safety and companionship with other Jews in this foreign land. After they return to their homeland, the next we hear is that Jesus disappeared on their visit to the Temple when he was about twelve. At the start, what a happy trip that must have been as they travel with a large group of their relatives and friends to Jerusalem on pilgrimage, "according to the custom" – that is, Passover.

But, on the day they left, Jesus stayed on and his parents simply thought he was wandering with the other kids in the group. He wasn't. They didn't discover it until the end of the day so they had a frantic race back to find him. It took three days! They must have been distraught. One of my children went missing for some hours once. It was a terrible time, but three days must have been hell.

But besides that incident, for thirty years or so, they were a family, like any other. They lived in a village of between two hundred and four hundred people. If you think about that, Jesus' ways, his mannerisms, his accent, his beliefs, his ability as a story teller, his kindness, his anger at injustice and pomposity - all that did not just come out of nowhere. He learned these in that community, but mostly from his parents, much of it from his father.

In those times, village life was simple. Often five or six houses were grouped together with one big common area and the stable in the middle. In such communities they learned to care for one another – many of Jesus' stories describe family life, community life, simple everyday things, such as a woman baking bread (the parable of the Leaven), about the person knocking on the door in the middle of the night looking for food, the stories about the hardship of widows, storing food for all the community to eat in hard times, the lost sheep, the labourers in the vineyard, others revealed the example of his father when Jesus asks his listeners, if your son asked for bread would you give him a stone or a snake? Not in Jesus' experience with Joseph!

Joseph presumably taught him a trade but Nazareth was not big enough to support a craftsman, let alone a father and son, so they must have travelled around the district working together on the farms and in other villages. He worked with his father day by day as a carpenter, a plumber, a stone mason, a tiler, a builder - he is what we might call today, 'a tradie' or a handyman. Joseph and Jesus probably did seasonal work on the local farms and the large estates. How do we know that?

Just listen to some of his stories and parables to see how he understands the rhythm of the seasons and farming life. He talks about letting the weeds grow among the wheat then separating them on the threshing floor, he talks about the birds eating the grain, storing the grain in the barns, he talks about the building trade and how important the cornerstone is. He talked about the farmer building bigger barns to store his grain, about fruit trees, hens, about storing wine, he talks about workers in the vineyard, about shepherds and lost sheep, about unjust landlords. He saw how badly some people were treated, how they were overworked, how they lost their farms because of crippling taxes. He talks about the aftermath of a roadside mugging (the parable of the Good Samaritan). He would have seen for himself Joseph's work ethic, his honesty and integrity, his compassion, his generosity, his passion for the fair treatment of workers, the widows, for those who suffer from injustice. Just look at Jesus' stories to see that how true that is!

Their faith was very important to this family – they were close to God. Their faith was nurtured by the same images that nurture our faith. He would have heard of the God who created us out of love, that God is the potter, the one who carves our name on his hand, the one who will never forget us, the loving parent who is there in good times and in bad. He would have been nurtured by that beautiful image of the Shepherd. He sang the psalms as we sometimes do and read the same scriptures that we often do. But we can hear the same message over and over, learn the same psalms and prayers but it is how we see it lived, how it is brought to life that makes the difference! Joseph's life and example, according to Jesus' stories, reminds us that faith, responding to God is an invitation to be more big-hearted, less petty, more forgiving, more compassionate.

So, Jesus learned that it is in how we treat each other defines us, as far as Jesus is concerned. We will be judged, he came to realise, by our treatment of others, I was hungry and lonely, sick and in prison. You looked after me – visited me, helped me. Where did he learn all that, if not from the example, the life of Joseph. Jesus was very intolerant of anything to do with injustice or hypocrisy – he condemned it again and again and it made him a lot of enemies. Where did that come from? Who influenced him to be like that? Joseph.

As we remember Joseph 'with a father's heart' we ask what sort of experience do we create, what sort of example do we give, what sort of family experience do we offer – hopefully one like the family Jesus where he learned his ways, his beliefs, his stories, his values.

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au