

Living next to a brighter light.

This is a sermon on how to live in dark political times and on stewardship. As will become clear.

Ahaz the Jewish king is in dread of two neighbouring Kings. Being a smallish country with attractive natural resources and a not-very-big army one worries about neighbouring, possibly predatory kings. Or presidents. Especially presidents who seem to embrace large portions of what we find antithetical to our understanding of justice, peace, fairness, human decency, truthfulness and compassion for the weak, the stranger and the foreigner in our land.

So Ahaz is feeling anxious, all knotted up about what he should do, or shouldn't do, and should he stock pile dates and walnuts or make treaties with these scary kings, and the prophet Isaiah drops in for a chat. Isaiah has little patience with poor Ahaz. Being a king means worrying. It's part of being responsible. He feels it's up to him to solve this and keep everyone safe. Ahaz has had endless political meetings and endless prayer meetings. Isaiah, rather shortly, deflates his sense of his own power.

“Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?" I can almost see Ahaz sit down suddenly and inwardly collapse. But what is to be done? Apparently, Isaiah has been told by God, very little. God will take care of this. “Therefore” says Isaiah, “the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.”

We tend to fixate on “Immanuel” but actually it could be summarized as “in the time taken between conception and bar-mitzvah, about 13 years, these kings will be gone.”

So King Ahaz can stop fixating on geopolitics, over which he has no real control anyway, and get on with being a good king, a king ruling God's people under God's law in righteousness and faithfulness and, above all else, trust.

Ahaz had to put aside military chest puffing, he had to let go of glory in battle, he had to stay home and try to govern on behalf of God. He became a steward of his position for the sake of God. (see below for more on Ahaz)

While most of us would find this a relief, I have a feeling that it might be a bit less glorious and flashy than most kings would be hoping for.

Now, I want to focus on Joseph.

I have tremendous sympathy for Joseph.

Some of you know my wife Lucy. But for those who don't she is also an Anglican priest, Rector of St Aidan's in the Beach. I love her passionately, and I admire her great skills and deep faith. But really I am also being taught humility by God through her. Her's is the greater, brighter light. In every way. It's like being Saturn in the night sky, next to a full moon.

Enter Joseph.

The Holy Scriptures give us so little information that we have to weave a fabric of faithful contemplation to bridge the gaps in the story. We tend to focus on Jesus and on Mary. But what of Joseph?

Joseph has to deal with a fiancée who is pregnant, but not by him, who has had a vision of an angel, who has a depth of inner stillness beyond anything he can really grasp. He has to deal with his masculine pride in the company of his friends and neighbours.

All he has to go on is a dream he had, and the directions an angel gave him in that dream.

I have often imagined Joseph coming home from the woodwork shop for lunch, eager to tell Mary about an order for shelves that came in that morning. He finds no food ready, and Mary is looking out of the window with baby Jesus in her arms. "Lunch?" he suggests, "Ready soon?". "Oh!" says Mary, "I was listening to Tapestry on the CBC. It was so profound! We've been praying about it."

Poor man! But when your wife is responsible for the Son of God you really don't have a leg to stand on.

What we know about Joseph really comes from looking at Jesus.

Jesus is calm and centred. He has deep faith in God. He believes in himself and trusts his own judgment. He listens to others and allows their ideas to change him when he judges them true. He cares for the poor and the powerless, valuing love and decency more than power or prestige. Jesus depends on the women in his life and never makes a sexist dismissal or joke. Jesus is emotionally whole.

That comes from Mary and Joseph together. I think Joseph had a huge responsibility for that.

Joseph realized, at some early point, that he was to take what was his and give it away for the sake of what and who was in his care. He put himself second to Mary and to Jesus.

It was his stewardship of his life and work, to give it away for the sake of what he saw God was doing, without ever being told just what that would mean.

I do not wish to turn either Ahaz or Joseph into plaster saints. (Actually Ahaz blew it shortly after this and he turned out to be a dreadful sycophant to Tiglath-Pileser the Assyrian king. Oh, well..)

My sense of what the Spirit is saying through these texts today is that we are called to be both less and more than we appear to be. A king and a carpenter. Both are invited by God to put their own glory, pride and self-image aside and give themselves away because God can do something better through them and with them. Dignity and peace, these are the rewards.

As we approach Christmas I invite you to let yourself be caught up in the manger scene, through a carol or a reading, a play or your own imagination. And there, let yourself go, just kneel, delighted and honoured, before the baby who so needs you to care for him, to help his parents, to enable them to do their job.

It is an invitation to step away from the big news-show picture of a TV generated reality. It is to allow yourself to know that the God of the Universe is asking you to help with the work of his child. How you help, or can help, you already know. All you need to do is, like Joseph, just do it, and be quietly glad for the whole of your life.