

# Love in the shadows

*MUC Fellowship@10, 21 December 2025*

*Alison Sampson, reflecting on Matthew 1:18-25*

*You can hear the following as a simple reflection on personal faith, and that's great. But for those who have ears to hear, it also has much to say about current events, whether the shootings in Bondi, the ongoing deaths in Gaza, and so much more. For, in Matthew's story, God demands that notions of righteousness, purity and holiness are set aside in favour of love. In such a faith, violence is impossible, not only the violence of holy war but the violence which demands we destroy the violent. This loving insistence on nonretaliation is one incarnation of the scandal of grace. But for now, we'll turn our attention to the man caught up in another scandal: Joseph.*

He thought he could do it quietly. Provide money for an abortion and never see her again. Or book the distant clinic; send her to the asylum; lock her in a nunnery. Whatever. No need to make a big fuss. He's a righteous man. He knows the law; he knows his rights. He knows he could call for an inquiry and have the betrothal publicly annulled, the woman stoned; he knows the first stone should be thrown by her father. But he doesn't insist. Instead, he decides to do it quietly 'for her sake.'

Of course, quietly is as quietly does. She has been found to be pregnant by those who were looking: soon enough, everyone will know. And righteous men won't marry soiled goods. There's no pension for single mums; there's no hiding. She faces destitution, prostitution, and worse. For her family's honour has been shamed. She will always have a target on her back. If not her father then her uncle or her brother will be quick to arrange an honour killing, anxious that their family name be restored.

It's unfortunate, but it's the way things are, and it's not really his concern.

So he thought he could do it quietly; he thought he could avoid scandal. Dissolve the betrothal, forget it, move on. Find a decent woman who knows how to keep her legs shut. Get the good wife, the fertile womb, the hardworking sons, his own vines and fig trees: all the rewards of conformity and obedience.



Unhappily for him, God was involved. But he thought he could do it quietly, and he slept.

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It's easy to sleep. It's easy to pretend that clean living is rewarded and that those who follow the rules are nearest God's heart. And Joseph knows the rules. He knows that a righteous man is entitled to a righteous woman, a virgin who will be faithful to him and him alone, and bring only honour to his name. He knows that his own son should be the firstborn heir. And he knows the sad consequences of ending the betrothal. But it's easy to sleep; for it's easy to close one's eyes to the effects of one's actions, especially when those actions are deemed to be right by family, culture, society and law.

We all close our eyes from time to time. We all confuse faith with clean living and morality and goodness; it's hardwired into us. We lull ourselves into thinking we earn God's grace through right thought, right speech, right action. We think being moral is paramount, and that goodness should be rewarded. But it seems that God doesn't work like this.

Instead, over and over in scripture we see God working through the chaos of human life to bring about salvation. Through the disastrous families in Genesis and all their lying, conniving and squabbling; through Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and other sexually compromised and even abused foreign wives; through the rapists and murderers, idolators and fools who are the forefathers in Matthew's genealogy: God is at work in the mess. And sometimes, God creates the mess.

This is all so offensive and so terrifying that the angel who shatters our slumber tends to say straight up: 'Don't be afraid!'

Like the angel who visits Joseph. 'Don't be afraid!' says the angel, then proceeds to set out the unthinkable. Joseph must renounce his righteous man's privilege, his righteous man's honour and dignity and status, and take the pregnant young girl as his bride. He must align himself with her, protect her, and claim and protect the child growing in her womb. To add insult to injury, this usurper of the inheritance, this illegitimately conceived son, is to be named 'God-saves', a phrase we now render as Jesus.

What, precisely, does God save? Not Joseph's reputation. Not his honour, not his dignity, not his status. But, the story tells us, this God saves people from their sin: including one particular young woman who is pregnant out of



wedlock and facing disaster. It's just the next instalment of a very long story of God saving people, and maybe God saves Joseph in other ways.

The story is so familiar and our culture so relaxed about pregnancy, that we can forget how shocking it is. Joseph has to overcome his sense of hurt, his suspicion of betrayal, and his cultural contempt for a woman who conceives outside marriage. He has to turn his back on deep-rooted concepts of goodness and purity and justice. He has to accept that his name will be dirt, his business will be affected, his mates will snigger behind his back. His well-ordered life is about to be turned upside down, and in ways he would never choose. No wonder he wants to dismiss her quietly and ignore the consequences of his righteous action.

But God's plan of salvation is unfolding. It requires Joseph to enter into a big public scandal, and it turns Joseph's sense of righteousness completely upside down. For God calls Joseph to wake up. God demands that he open his eyes to a deeper reality, where love takes priority over obedience to God's law and scandal forms the womb of grace.

When Joseph emerges from his sleep, he does something very shameful and brave and foolish: he does exactly as the angel commands him. What was the result? The people call the child Emmanuel, God-with-us: and even his birth is a scandal. And maybe God saved Joseph from an addiction to holiness and a priggish self-righteousness and the violence which inevitably flows from these things.

This Advent, we have looked at ways in which God comes to us. Like a thief in the night. Like a firestick farmer. Like no Messiah ever known. And now we see God wrapped in scandal like a swaddling cloth, and the scandal only grows as he does. Conceived in shadows. Adopted into the family. Confusing his cousin. Outraging the religious types. Horrifying the whole world with his humiliating, shameful death. 'Blessed is anyone who is not scandalised by me,' Jesus says: because scandal is found wherever he is.

Joseph didn't seek scandal; the scandal found him. But Joseph accepted it, and entered into it, and adopted it into the family; and Christ quite literally dwelled with him. So I suggest that if we, too, want to encounter Christ, we better be ready for scandal. We better be ready to have all our cherished assumptions about right and wrong shaken up and turned inside out. We better be ready to share our lives with people we might deem to be sinful, shameful, or defiled; all those people we'd sooner ignore. We better be ready



to place other people's lives above our reputations, our rights, our sense of holiness, even the law. And we better be ready for mess. Because God doesn't choose purity and perfection to save people from their sins. Instead, God chooses locations of scandal and shame and transforms them into grace.

Joseph woke up to this scandalous reality, and he encountered God. This Christmas, let us also wake up, curious and unafraid. And let us move towards our own scandals and shadows that we, too, might wake up to the presence of the One who dwells among us: God-with-us, the Christ Child, Emmanuel. Ω