

Advent 4

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[0 : 00] Well, the fourth candle on the Advent ring has been lit. Christmas Day is four days away.! It's the time of year when £21 billion will be spent on gifts. Amazon take 41 orders per second.

10 million turkeys will be cooked across the UK. 300 million crackers are pulled on Christmas Day.

740,000 portions of Christmas pudding will be eaten and 7.5 million mince pies are bought.

It's also the time of year when a whole mix of reactions take place within us all. For some of us at this stage, everything is ready. We're feeling very calm and excited, and we can't wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus. But for some of us, we're feeling very stressed.

We can't believe there are just four days to go. There is so much still to do, and we're not sure how it's going to get done, let alone spend time thinking about Jesus.

[1 : 20] And there are others for whom this time of year is just too overwhelming. It's been a very difficult year, and it's hard to focus on and celebrate anything.

A well-known Christian author called Max Lucado said, however we are feeling towards the end of the year, Christmas compounds it.

If we're feeling depressed, we feel more depressed. If we're grieving, the burden of our grief is heavier. If we are lonely, we feel even more alone.

Let's just think about loneliness for a moment, as it's very common at this time of year. It affects one in four adults. 2.3 million older people wish for company, and approximately 4 million over 65s are likely to eat Christmas dinner alone.

I'm reminded of my childhood. My parents loved Christmas and entered into celebrating it wholeheartedly, and they didn't like the thought of anyone they knew being alone at Christmas.

[2 : 33] So each year, they would invite people who were on their own to join us. My brother, sister, and I used to complain every year, Oh gosh, who's coming this year, Mum?

But as we grew up, we did commend their hospitality. Today's Gospel reading from Matthew reminds us of the very first Christmas, and it ultimately reminds us of the real meaning of Christmas, the birth of Jesus, also called Emmanuel, which means God with us.

And it doesn't mean God just with us when we're full of joy. It means God with us when we're lonely, God with us when we're depressed, God with us when we're grieving, and God with us when we're overwhelmed.

And when we turn to him, he will give us a deep comfort and peace that only he can give. The birth of Jesus and the surrounding events are well known, but what is the Lord saying to us afresh this Christmas?

What is he saying to us through the reading that he wants us to hear today, this Christmas in 2025? In our reading, the angel Gabriel appears to Joseph in a dream.

[3 : 58] We are probably all familiar with the angel appearing to Mary to tell her she is to be the mother of Jesus, and much has been written and said about that.

But the part Joseph was to play is just as important as Mary's. He was to be the husband of Mary and father of Jesus. Gosh, no wonder the angel says, do not fear.

I'm sure Joseph was terrified and completely daunted by what was being asked of him. And there is much we can learn about him. And I'd like us to think about two things that I would suggest we can learn from Jesus that encourage us in our own relationship with Jesus and our lives as Christians.

Firstly, Joseph never speaks a word. Not just in Matthew's account that was read for us earlier, but throughout the entire Bible.

In Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, an angel appears to Mary and tells her she's going to be the mother of Jesus, the saviour of the world. And Luke tells us how Mary reacts and what she says.

[5 : 12] And later on, she bursts into that well-known song, the Magnificat, which is sung throughout churches to this day. Here in Matthew's account, we have the angel appearing to Joseph, but we have very little of his reaction.

We're not told anything that Joseph says. In fact, there's no record of Joseph saying anything about the birth of Jesus. I was reminded of this on one occasion when I was working in a church and we were holding the annual nativity and all the parts had been allocated to the children.

But one young boy was very upset. He said, I don't want to be Joseph. I want another part. When he was asked why he didn't want to be Joseph, he said, Joseph doesn't say anything and he doesn't do a lot.

Oh, the joys of organising a nativity. But the young boy actually had a point. Joseph doesn't say anything, but he powerfully reminds us that character is revealed, not necessarily in what we say, but in what we do.

Joseph is clearly a man of few words, and I'm sure we all know some men like that. And in becoming the husband of Mary and the father of Joseph, that is actually his strength.

[6 : 40] True righteousness is revealed in our actions. Behind the scenes, Joseph quietly did an awful lot. He did what God asked him with no questioning, no arguing and no fuss.

And perhaps God is challenging us to do the same, to not just speak truth, but live it like Joseph did. There are times in each of our lives when God will call us to do something and we will need to be like Joseph.

Say nothing, but just do it. Secondly, Joseph was a man who faithfully obeyed. Four times the angel appeared to him, and each and every time Joseph doesn't say anything.

But he does do what the angel asked without question. I'm certainly not a woman of few words. And if an angel appeared to me four times in dreams, I would be having many conversations about it.

But Joseph's faith is so strong, and his desire to do what God asks and be obedient to him is so strong too. Stronger than worrying what people thought of him and what the consequences might be.

[8 : 04] Let's just recap again. We're told that Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph. And in those days, a pledge of marriage was a very strong commitment.

Stronger than it is today. It was in fact legally binding. And that is why we are told Joseph had it in mind to divorce her quietly and cancel the pledge.

Cancel this pledge because Mary, being pregnant before they were married, would make people believe that she had committed adultery and would bring great shame on her and her family.

So Joseph wanted to do the right thing and separate from her before she gave birth. He didn't want to cause her any public disgrace or any shame.

He really did want to do the right thing by her. Then the angel appears to him in a dream and tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife and explain that what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit and that 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.

[9 : 23] We are then told that when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him and he took Mary home as his wife.

Imagine for a moment, each of you, waking up from a dream where the angel Gabriel appears to you and tells you to do something. Joseph has a wonderful relationship with God.

That's quite apparent. He has the utmost trust in God and he doesn't need to actually question him. That's a challenge for us in our own relationship with God, isn't it?

I wonder personally if I'm as trusting. I'm not sure I am. One thing we do know about Joseph is that he was your everyday carpenter.

There was nothing unusual or special about him. And we can see throughout the Bible that time and time again, God uses everyday people to do special things for him.

[10 : 37] Moses, who had a stutter but spoke out for God. David, the small shepherd who killed the giant Goliath. Rahab, a prostitute who helped the spies of Jericho escape.

Lydia, who was a seller of purple cloth and a prophetess. They were all different but all everyday people. But the one thing that they did have in common was their faith in God, which was bigger than their fears.

And it's the same with Joseph. He was fearful of Mary being pregnant and the consequences, but his faith was much bigger. There are times in our lives for each of us when the task ahead is scary and daunting.

And we need then to remember that God is bigger and look to him and not the task. We need to get a big picture of God in our minds, something that Joseph was clearly very good at doing.

God didn't just choose Joseph because he knew he'd be a good husband to Mary and a good father to Jesus. He knew he would be obedient and stand firm in his faith, especially when opposition and accusation came, as it surely would when Mary's pregnancy became public knowledge.

[12 : 05] But Joseph heard from God and obeyed in faith. Perhaps some of us here today may face the scorn of others for believing in Christ, but God has given us something far greater than a dream.

He has given us his word, the Bible, which is full of his promises, which encourage and strengthen us as he calls us and helps us and equips us to trust and obey him each and every day.

In the words of the well-known him, trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey.

He calls us to live for him, not so much with our words, but with how we live our lives. And of course, he calls us out of his great love for us because he has plans for us that are good for us and which will not harm us, as it says in Jeremiah 29, verse 11.

So four more days until Christmas Day, and it's the time of year when people make a record number of to-do lists.

[13 : 25] Russ read a very interesting one from, I believe, the Good Housekeeping magazine. Well, I came across the Christian Christmas to-do list on Facebook, which I would just like to read.

Now, I'm not wanting to say this to add to your stress. I'm not suggesting that we do the whole list, but there may be one or two things the Holy Spirit prompts us to carry out.

Number one, receive God's gift of Jesus Emmanuel. Number two, spend time focusing on Jesus and being in his presence.

Number three, be the gift to others, the lonely, the depressed, the unwell, the grieving. Number four, wrap someone in a hug.

Number five, send peace. Number six, donate food. Number seven, speak love. Number eight, forgive freely.

[14 : 27] Number nine, offer hope. Number 10, breathe in wonder. Number 11, light a candle for someone you miss.

Number 12, visit someone who feels forgotten. Number 13, be a bridge, not a wall.

And number 14, be the light. This Christmas, may we all know the deep, deep love that God has for us and choose to love him back.

It's one choice that we won't regret making this Christmas. And may we be like Joseph and be people for whom our actions speak louder than our words.

And may we faithfully obey what God asks us to do, however fearful we may feel. Let's pray. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you again for your word.

[15 : 34] And we thank you for this account of the angel appearing to Joseph. And we thank you for him and his obedient faith and trust in you.

And as we go out into the week ahead, Lord, would you fill us with your spirit and enable us to live lives that are faithfully obedient to you, however scared we feel at times.

And help us, Lord, to be the gift to others this Christmas. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.