

## [Matthew 1:18-25](#)

Now there was a time  
When they used to say  
That behind every great man  
There had to be a great woman<sup>1</sup>

If you're a fan of Eighties music, you'll recognise those words. They are the opening verse of 'Sisters Are Doin' It For Themselves', a glorious feminist anthem of female emancipation from simply being the supporters of men to being people who are out front making major contributions to society in their own right.

The story of the Annunciation as related to Joseph reverses the patronising 'Behind every great man there is a great woman' slogan of past times which the song references. This is a story in which behind a great woman – Mary – is a great man – Joseph.

I want to show how Joseph is a model not only for supporting Mary but also for following Jesus.

**Firstly**, Joseph displays *humility*.

I didn't realise until this year something that absolutely stares you in the face about Joseph: he doesn't utter a word in the Gospels. Mary has plenty to say! But Joseph – well, maybe he's the strong, silent type.

Certainly he makes no play for himself and his own importance. He knows his rôle is to support Mary in her amazing task. He doesn't seek the limelight. He simply gets on with doing the right thing. Quietly. In the shadows.

The same is true about following Jesus. The rôle of the Jesus-follower is to support him, not draw attention to ourselves.

I've been a minister for thirty years. Five years into my ministry, I got the chance to be a seminar speaker at the biggest Christian holiday/conference event in this country, Spring Harvest. One of my minister friends wrote to me and said, "You're getting into the evangelical big time now!"

Well, as you can tell – no, I didn't. If I'm honest, I think I would have enjoyed going on to speak at more conferences, but it only ever happened once more, at an event called Easter People. And then the opportunities dried up.

But the important thing was to get on with proclaiming and supporting Jesus wherever God gave me the opportunity. And that proved generally to be in quieter, more obscure places than under the lights.

But that's OK. Because the deal about being a Christian is not self-promotion. It's promoting Jesus.

Are you tempted to make a name for yourself? I tell you, it's an awful lot better making a name for Jesus.

**Secondly**, Joseph displays *courage*.

Here we must remember what a different society Joseph and Mary were living in compared to ours. In our culture, we have learned recently that for the first time births outside marriage exceeded those inside marriage. But Joseph and Mary lived in a world where the moral norm was for sex to be restricted to marriage.

Therefore, for Joseph to discover that Mary (who is not yet quite married to him) is pregnant is devastating. Not only that, but it will also bring shame on him in the village. We know that one of the stories which went around about Mary in those days is that she fell pregnant after a liaison with a Roman soldier, an enemy.

It's not surprising that he thinks of ending the relationship – although his compassion is shown by wanting simply to end it with a divorce (because a betrothal had legal status) rather than exposing Mary to the risk of being stoned for adultery.

Yet in the face of mockery and shame, and with the encouragement of the angelic visitor in his dream, he presses on with marrying Mary. That takes courage.

Often it takes courage to do what God asks of us. When Jesus grew up, he gave a lot of teaching that requires courage to follow in the face of likely social reaction. That is true for us today, too. It can be a challenge to stand up for truth-telling when people want to cover an embarrassment with lies. It can require courage to defend the needs of refugees and asylum seekers when others in our society want to sling anyone not born here out of the country. Bravery is needed to stand in opposition to the idea that disabled babies should be aborted before birth, as if the disabled are of less value than the healthy.

Sometimes Christians are portrayed as wimps. But if you really follow Jesus you won't be a wimp, you will be courageous. The real wimps are those who opt out of following Jesus, because they just want to be popular or have an easy life.

Which are you?

**Thirdly** and finally, Joseph displays *faith*.

Joseph was a good guy. He wanted to be faithful to God's law and still protect Mary. That's why he opted for the divorce route, we're told. He was a salt of the earth type, and even some of those who mocked him (for which he needed the courage we've just spoken about) probably also had a sneaking respect for him. He was one of the good'uns.

But being good is not what gets you into God's people. Having faith is what does that. And it's when Joseph has the faith to do what the angel tells him that he shows himself to be a true believer.

Many people today still think that if they do good things they will go to heaven. But that is not the Christian message. We all fail God. Not only that, we tend to deceive ourselves. We criticise others for their wrongdoing while cutting ourselves plenty of slack for our own failings. No-one is good enough to reach God's standards.

Joseph's action of trusting God's message through the angel and acting on it reminds us to stop relying on our own goodness to get us into heaven. It won't get us there. Instead, we need to hold out empty hands in trust to God, so that he can give us all we need for salvation. That means receiving the forgiveness of our sins. That means receiving the goodness of Jesus in place of that sin. That means receiving his Spirit to give us life, just as the same Spirit enabled life to begin in Mary's womb.

This is the only way we can be good enough for heaven: to receive the goodness of Jesus by holding out the empty hands of faith.

**So** – where does all of this leave each of us this Christmastime? Will we accept the humility to make our lives all about Jesus rather than about ourselves? Will we take the necessary courage to follow Jesus, even when that puts us at risk in our society? And will we stop trumpeting how good we are to rely instead by faith on the goodness of Jesus qualifying us for heaven?

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<sup>1</sup> Eurythmics and Aretha Franklin, *Sisters Are Doin' It For Themselves*; Annie Lennox / David Allan Stewart, © Universal Music Publishing Int. Mgb Ltd.; from the album *Be Yourself Tonight*, 1984.