



TFTD Advent 18: Joseph

I remember one time I went to my son's parents evening when he was at secondary school. It was one of those situations where you have to go from subject teacher to subject teacher and wait until it's your turn. We were waiting to speak to the Biology teacher about our Danny when the parents in front of us finished and got up from their seats

and we moved forward to take their place. The teacher greeted Marian, my wife, very warmly and said, "Oh you must be Mrs Sudbury, you look just like Danny!" And then she turned to me and said, still smiling, "And you look like you had nothing to do with it!"

I didn't really think anything of it at the time. Our son Danny does look a lot like his Mum. Danny was doing fine in biology lessons so the teacher was pleased to see us. Maybe they had been learning about genetics.

It was Marian who remarked on it afterwards; "It's a good job you are Danny's dad otherwise you could have been really upset by what she said." I thought about it and realised that this was probably the case. It had been a rather insensitive thing to say. Apparently around 2% of the human population are mistaken about who their biological father is. Which is a high enough figure for a lot of men to be worried about it. If I had been worried about it, then the teacher's very public remark would have been humiliating for me.

When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, and he knew he was not the father he resolved to "dismiss her quietly". This decision is ascribed to his righteousness because it saved Mary from being exposed to "public disgrace." (Matthew 1:19). It took the intervention of an angel appearing in a dream to persuade him to go ahead and marry Mary. The angel begins with the words that appear elsewhere in the Biblical accounts of the birth of Christ, "Do not be afraid".

It may be that angels just had to start all their conversation with the words, "Do not be afraid," because they knew people were always frightened when they first saw them. But we might take these words as words that named the

fear that Joseph felt about being ridiculed, and shamed even, for marrying a woman who had a child by a different father.

Marian and I agreed to get married when I was still a university student. I was 22 when I married Marian. It was the mid-eighties. None of our friends were even thinking of getting married and some were openly horrified that we were. Emerging from the bubble of university life, it felt like marriage was over and nobody was ever going to get married again. Wasn't it an institution that existed to oppress women? Why bother when it was socially acceptable to move in with each other and live together without getting married?

But Marian and I are both romantics and we wanted to get married. But obviously, we didn't want our marriage to be one in which Marian felt any way oppressed. So, we decided that we would both keep our own surnames. She stayed a Sudbury and I carried on being a Pye.

But then we had children. What do couples who had kept their own surnames when they got married call their children? Searching for a logical way through this conundrum (and discarding the option of calling them Sudbury-Pye), I argued that children always carry the mother's surname, it was just that hitherto the mothers had adopted their husband's surname before they had children. Therefore, our children should be called Sudbury.

Looking back at my choice the one regret that I have is that I did not consult my father. The name Pye came from him and from his father. It wasn't just my name that I was relinquishing.

I gradually learned as well that most couples in our position gave the child the father's surname. When I became a teacher, I had many pupils whose parents were not married and who bore their father's name and not their mother's. The logic I applied was not the logic most families applied. So, I feel slightly odd about that occasionally. But only slightly. And only occasionally.

Of course, the decision I made has given me and my children a lifetime of people not being quite sure what our relationship is. I think people who know us can see that our relationship is very much a father and child one, which it in fact is. But people who just meet my children might sometimes try and work out what our story is when really there is no story to work out. Apparently, my children hardly ever have to explain why they I don't have the same surname

as their father. And actually, it is something that I barely ever think about either.

It did come up this year when my grandson was born. It took my son and daughter-in-law a while to finalise his name. His name is Eason Robin Sri-Sudbury. Sudbury from my father-in-law and Sri is the first syllable of my son's father-in-law's surname. And I'm there as well. But actually, his name is Eason.

Joseph was going to dismiss Mary quietly. It took a scary angel to change his mind. But once he changed his mind, he just got on with it and did a great job leading Mary and Jesus to safety in Egypt before Herod's soldiers came for them. That's what really mattered.

It is to Joseph's credit that he set aside the rights he was expected to enforce in a patriarchal society (but let's not under-estimate the role of the scary angel). I think it is significant and not just a coincidence that Joseph has to set these rights aside when God comes to be with us in the shape of Jesus. But I think once Joseph had made the decision he wouldn't have looked back. Why would he? All his attention would have been focussed on what God was doing right in the middle of his own house.

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