

Well everyone, that reading today gives us quite a lot of information on this man Joseph who we are going to be thinking about today. Actually you might think you don't know very much about Joseph but what it tells us is who Joseph placed his hope in.

Can you imagine how he is feeling? Let's look for a moment at what has just happened to him.

You see marriages would have been arranged between families, and so everything was set that Joseph and Mary would marry, probably in a year's time. Back then when you were engaged or betrothed to someone it would have almost been like marriage – a contract was signed between the man and woman. Mary's dad would have received a payment from Joseph's dad as compensation for losing their daughter. During this time the couple would have lived apart, and there were very strict laws if anything was to happen in their relationship during their engagement. For example if the girl was to be found pregnant, both the man and woman would have been taken to the gate of the town and stoned to death.

So imagine how Joseph is feeling. He has discovered that Mary is pregnant and it's definitely not his baby. So he's frightened because he knows his life is now at risk. But he also knows that Mary's life is in danger. So he plans to divorce her quietly so as not to bring on total disgrace on her. It was a longshot but it was possible in the laws that they would not suffer persecution in the same way. I'm sure he was hoping that none of this had ever happened. He probably hoped that his family had never introduced him to Mary. It seemed like a very hopeless situation. It was impossible to see how it would ever get fixed. Joseph was a good man. His family were descendants of King David and so the religious culture was very important to them. And yet because he was a good man he knew that he didn't want Mary's life to be labelled by the incident.

And so when everything seemed impossible to fix, God spoke to Joseph through his Messenger an Angel. The angel told him not to be afraid because the baby was from the Holy Spirit – it wasn't a mistake – it was part of God's plan. And so Joseph listened, obeyed, and supported Mary. He knew that God's plans were greater than his and he knew there was hope through this Good News.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent and today we think about Hope. Now when we use the word Hope, especially at this time of the year we usually connect it with wishing for things. For example, I hope to get nice presents for Christmas. I hope that Man City win Europe in 2022.

Those are all things that we wish for. But when the Bible talks about Hope, it's about the expectation of something that is going to come, and is part of God's plan. Whatever we put our faith in will determine where we get our hope from.

Joseph saw beyond the issues that were facing him and Mary, and saw the hope that was to come in Jesus. But so often in life we give up hope, especially when things are difficult. We can't see a solution to the issues that we are facing.

What examples are there of things that happen that might seem hopeless?

- Someone who is very ill pulling through
- Not feeling good after a school exam

All these things feel as though it's impossible to have any good outcome to them. I'm guessing you can now imagine how Joseph would have been feeling when he heard that Mary was pregnant.

[Story illustration]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaPCxoBDgbA>

Hope declares that something incredibly better will come, even when things seem so tough or impossible to make better. Remember that God is always in control of a perfect plan for us. We need to trust in him.

For Joseph, we don't get to hear much more about him after the first chapter or two, but we do know that for the next 29 years he shaped Jesus' life, he cared for him, he trained him in how to be a carpenter. There's no mention of any of this – Joseph trusted in God's plan and got on with things. Joseph knew that all the promises of a Saviour from the OT would be fulfilled in the life of Jesus. And whilst Joseph could have given up on Mary but more importantly on God, he knew the incredible hope that was in Jesus, the Saviour of the World.

Whatever you might face in life – whether it's the worry of exams, the worry about your health and family, whatever it is, the Hope that is seen in this candle lit today promises us that Light always shines in dark places. The hope that only God brings gives us the promise that nothing is impossible to God.

Hope can be summed up in a lovely verse within Proverbs chapter 3 which I am going to use but elaborate on as we think today about the faith which Joseph & Mary had as they consider the joyful hope that would come in Jesus. Here's the words of that Proverb :

Trust in the Lord with all your heart (just as Mary & Joseph did), and lean not on your own understanding (even when any good outcome seems impossible), in all your ways acknowledge him (so put your hope in the Lord), and he will make your paths straight (he will see his will fulfilled as you obey and trust him).