

Social media and the press have an absolute field day when it comes to gossip or news. Even though social media is only something that has been around since 2003, the information revolution has absolutely exploded through it. Do you know that every month across the world there are 2.3 billion active users on YouTube. In any given day there are 720,000 hours of new videos uploaded to YouTube.

We thrive on information. We feed ourselves on the latest news. When the latest scandal has hit Hollywood, the news of it has crossed the world via social media in a matter of minutes.

There are some videos that hit records when they are published. I've found one of the top 10 videos that had such a massive spread very quickly. The video you are about to see has nothing at all to do with Christmas, but it is very funny. In the space of 24 hours it had been watched 50 million times. Watch this

[Chewbacca video]

There's funny stuff like this that makes us all laugh, but it's amazing how much other stuff spreads quickly across social media, in some cases ruining people's lives. The courts are full of cases where things have been said about individuals and it has ruined their livelihoods.

But this type of gossip is nothing new. The great Greek philosopher Socrates shunned gossip – he actually had a little test for people before he would listen to anything. It was called the triple filter test, and it was made up of 3 questions. Firstly, Socrates would ask is it true, then if it's true then is it something good, and if it's true and good, then finally is it useful for me to know about it. If we maybe that to all that goes into the newspapers and social media today, there may not be so much to write about.

So I want you to place yourself in the scene of our reading tonight and think about the gossip that would have been around Nazareth. An unmarried teenage girl. An unplanned pregnancy. A far-fetched explanation. And so the news would have spread like wildfire. "Did you hear? That wee girl Mary – she's pregnant. What does Joseph think he's playing at, bringing such shame to the family." "Well, I heard that Joseph's not even the father. How could she do that to him? He's such a good and just man." "Who is the father?" "They say Joseph still intends to take her as his wife. He's going to marry her after all this." "The religious leaders need to deal with it. She and her love child should be stoned. The law requires it."

I'm sure Joseph heard the whispers and saw the looks, if not in the village then certainly in his own imagination. Joseph knows this a scandal. He knows there are questions of faithfulness. So by the next morning of knowing the news it will all seem pretty clear. Joseph will awake and do what he has to do. He will quietly send Mary away.

We however have the eyes of perspective. Yes, it was a scandal. But it is not a scandal of immorality. You see the real scandal is that God of the Universe has chosen to be with us. We thought God was up there, or out there, maybe somewhere in the future. And yet we see that God is intimately present. God's Holy

Spirit fills the womb of Mary. The breath of God in her is so real that she begins to show like the pregnant woman she is declaring “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name”.

This story is not about the usual questions of faithfulness or betrayal or infidelity. This pregnancy is a statement of God’s faithfulness and commitment to God’s people. In this pregnancy God renews all the covenants of history and again chooses us to be his people. God’s continuing promise to show up and live in the midst of our lives is fulfilled in Mary’s pregnancy. It’s actually all about God’s faithfulness and love. And this child yet to be born is the revelation of God’s love for humanity. This love will bring new and living hope to all generations and people.

You see Christmas would not be Christmas if it wasn’t for Joseph. He might be one of the characters in the story that we hear little about – we’ll sing a lot about Mary, the baby, the shepherds, the wise men, but without Joseph Christmas doesn’t begin. It requires Joseph’s view of a scandal to be enlarged and opened to the possibilities that God is doing something new. He has begun to see this situation through the eyes of faith. It required Joseph to place his trust on the message, the good news which the Angel was declaring to him through the night.

And so Joseph awoke in the morning and did what he had to do. He began emptying himself. He let go of fear. He let go of the villagers’ voices and stares. He let go of his doubts and questions. He let go of his own reputation and standing in the community. With each letting go, Joseph emptied himself so that he could truly become the servant that God required him to be – security for Mary and for the baby. Not a mouthpiece or promoter, but to quietly get on with the task that was his. And that would be his role for the next 33 years, and that’s all we hear of him.

I’ve been doing a lot of searching over recent months, and I suspect COVID has also influenced my thinking, in that I believe we as God’s people need to empty ourselves of our reputations, our standings in community, our worries about what others would say about us, and make the priority of being a servant our top thing – in particular to empty ourselves of all the things that occupy us and become a servant again for God – to be present alongside people to love them, to protect them, and let them know that God deeply loves them. That’s the scandal of God coming to us – no one is excluded, everyone is loved and adored. The scandal that would spread would not be about big events that Jesus put on to bring in the crowds. The gossip that would spread would be about his willingness to step into the lives of individuals, no matter who they were, and let them know that they mattered. But Jesus was never popular – whether with religious folks or with others who wanted him to be someone he wasn’t. He very often required for people to change from their current pattern of living and become more Christ like. He was known for declaring that, “Whoever wants to become great amongst you must be a servant”. He was willing to take on the lowest of roles, washing dirty feet that came in from the streets around him, and he told his disciples that he had set an example for them to follow – they were to serve each other.

The arrival of Jesus into poverty, a man who would have nowhere to call his own all his life, a man who ate with sinners and prostitutes, is actually what he requires us to be. We must like Joseph empty ourselves of our own expectations and choose to follow a different path. Have you considered just how full your life is with all that goes on? Are you willing like Joseph to take a different approach; to empty yourself and become what God wants you to be in the year ahead? For me, this next year will be very much about being present with people, encouraging them in their journey with God. That means other things need to be emptied in order that I can be what God desires of me as the pastor of this church. This morning I was visiting one of our elderly parishioners in a Nursing Home and as I began to get ready to leave, she said to me, “will you come back soon? It’s not good when I’m on my own here”. And again it made me realise that in the scandal of God coming to be one of us, he was declaring the most important life lesson of all – love one another as Christ has loved you, love your neighbour as yourself.

Joseph emptied himself of everything that was about him, and through his willingness to submit his entire future into the hands of God, the most incredible event in all of history took place. We too must let go of the things that hinder God from truly using us in order that the Good News of the presence of Jesus living among us may become the thing that gets gossiped around our community rather than social media. I pray you will make time over this holiday season to seek God’s direction for the year ahead.