

*Then Joseph her husband, being a just man...*

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I want to start with two stories; stories from the Gospels that you've heard before.

I will apologise because they're not Christmas stories, even though we're still well and truly in the Christmas Season; there are no shepherds or angels or farmyard animals; no stars in the night sky or babies in a manger. They're not Christmas stories but they're stories that show us in very real ways what Christmas is all about. And they say a lot about the radical difference that the story of Christ's birth makes in our lives

The first is a story about a Canaanite woman, a descendant of those people displaced from their homes by Israel when they conquered the Promised Land more than a millennia before the time of Jesus.

She comes to Jesus because her daughter is seriously ill. She is desperate. She needs help. So desperate for help that she barges into the small circle of disciples to cry for Jesus' help. But the disciples and Jesus agree. She is an intruder. She is an outsider; a foreigner. And she has no right to interrupt what they are doing. She has no right to ask for Jesus' help. She and her people and Jesus and his people are ancient enemies; having fought each other on and off for more than a thousand years. But she doesn't care about any of that. Her daughter is ill and she has no where else to turn.

But Jesus knows the rules. He knows what the law and social convention say. He knows that his mission is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, as he tells her. Her problems are not his problems. And his rules are not her rules. And rules are rules – even if they seem heartless. Jesus and his disciples are agreed: "send her away," they ask him.

The second story also involves a woman; although in this case she does not come to Jesus voluntarily. She is dragged before him; and she is thrown down on the ground in front of him. She is incontrovertibly, undeniably guilty. She has been caught in the act of adultery. What has happened to the other person who was caught in adultery – the man – we do not know. Sadly, we're never told. But she has been caught; and dragged out into the public. To be shamed; to be terrorised. And as this terrified woman lies in the dust at his feet, fearing for her life, Jesus is asked by her accusers what they should do.

But their question is not as sincere as we might imagine. It is an open and shut case. She was caught in the act. Her guilt is unquestionable. And the Law is perfectly clear. The punishment is obvious. "What do you say?" Jesus is asked. But before he answers we are told that he bends down to the ground; and with his finger he writes in the dust. What he writes remains a mystery. We're never told. But when he finally answers, after an awkward pause, he invites them all to carry out the punishment that the Law demands. If they are convinced that she is guilty, then they have no choice. Rules are rules. The Law says that she must be stoned to death. And that is exactly what they should do, Jesus suggests. And rules are rules – even if they seem heartless.

What goes through Jesus' mind when a poor, frightened Canaanite woman,

terrified for her daughter, kneels on the ground in front of him and begs for Jesus' help? Maybe he's thinking about the terror that his own mother will face one day in the future when her child, her only-begotten son, is arrested and beaten and crucified; publicly shamed and terrorised. Maybe he sees his mother's face in the face of this poor woman at his feet; and maybe he sees his mother's tears in her tears.

And what goes through Jesus' mind when a terrified woman is thrown to the ground in front of him? Does he see his own mother's face in her terrified face; and his mother's tears in her tears? A mother who would have faced exactly the same punishment had her betrothed husband not agreed to terminate the relationship quietly. Who like this poor woman would have cowered in fear in the dust waiting for the first stone to strike.

Joseph had every right to demand a different outcome. She was betrothed to him; and he knew that he was not the father of this child that she was expecting. Nature being what it is, there was no other explanation. Mary must have sinned. Her guilt would have been obvious – at least to Joseph. Stories about an angel; about being the mother of the messiah were too far-fetched to imagine; too convenient to believe. Reason said that she had to be guilty. And the Law said that she should be stoned. And rules are rules – even if they seem heartless.

And Joseph should know what the Law said, shouldn't he. He was, as we are told by Matthew, [he was] a righteous man; a just man. And to be righteous required just one thing: to know the Law and to follow it. Even when it seems heartless.

I've long wondered whether or not Matthew is having a bit of fun with us. Kinda putting it in the story to see if anyone's paying attention. On one hand calling Joseph a righteous man; a just man. And then, in the next breath, telling us of Joseph's plan to disobey the Law. His plan not to hold Mary to account for what could only have been assumed to be her sin; and, instead, planning to end the relationship quietly. Because the Law was the Law; and rules were rules. But Joseph chose not to obey the rules. And for that Matthew ironically calls him a just man. Even though there was no justice – as far as the Law was concerned – for letting the guilty go free. That's anarchy; not righteousness; not justice. Rules are rules. Whether it's a young woman in Nazareth; or a Canaanite woman in Tyre and Sidon; or a sinful woman in Jerusalem.

Unless, of course, there's something that we don't know about God's rules and laws. Something we had to learn. Something that Jesus had to learn. Maybe something that he learnt from his foster-father Joseph. Something about the place of compassion. Of being willing, in love, to step into the other person's experience. To step into their shoes, to hear their struggles; to know their fears.

That's what Joseph does for Mary. And that's what Jesus does for us. He enters into our experience in every possible way. He is born as one of us for all of us. Even for all those who sin. Like you. Like me. He knows our struggles and our fears. And he does what we cannot do if we are to be forgiven our faults and failings; our weaknesses and our sins.

And when we start every relationship, every conversation, with the knowledge that he has done all of that for us, it becomes incredibly difficult to withhold compassion from others. When we start with the conviction that Christ has forgiven us, it becomes that much harder to throw the stones we've been gripping all along in our hands.