

Each Advent and Christmas, we have a difficult task as Christians, because each year we are asked to really embrace the radical circumstances and message of Jesus' birth. Nothing about this story fits into any contemporary conception of normal. In fact, nothing about this story fits into any ancient Jewish conception of normal either. But it is really hard to embrace something that is so elusive to our modern sensibilities and yet has made its way into our cultural imaginations and become part of our everyday vocabulary. The end result of this is that the story has become more or less unremarkable.

This conundrum is what Geraldine Granger was trying to address in the 1999 Winter episode of the Vicar of Dibley. For those of you who aren't acquainted with the Vicar of Dibley, it was a British sitcom about one of the first women priests in the Church of England back in the early 1990s. She was serving a small rural parish with an astoundingly eccentric cast of characters as members.

One Christmas, they decide to put on a production of the Nativity. To get everyone's juices flowing and to get them into their characters, Geraldine had them practice by improvising the story, beginning with an interaction between Mary and Joseph when she announced she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

She turns to Alice, who is playing Mary and says, "You're young, you're engaged, and you find out your pregnant. Joseph, your fiancé, comes in. Now go."

"Hey Joe, cup of tea, busy day?" "Yes, I've been carpentering all day long. Yourself, interesting day?" Oh I spent the morning shopping – got you a lovely supper. Loaves and fishes – family recipe." Joseph asks, "And this afternoon? Anything happen?" To which Alice replied, "I came home and the angel of the Lord was waiting and made me with child, who is going to be lord of all mankind." Joseph's response – "Oh right."

At this point, Geraldine steps in trying to get them to realize how stunning this news really is. Taking the role of Joseph, she bellows when Mary announces

she's pregnant, and begins haranguing her for details. She is not satisfied when Mary explains that the father is "God Almighty, creator of all things."

Eventually, however, Geraldine as Joseph takes Mary at her word and apologizes, only to have Mary say, "Get away from me, Joseph. How could you doubt me? I don't want to see you again. I'm going to Bethlehem on me own."

Well, this improvisation is obviously a departure from the account as it was passed down to us from the Gospel of Matthew, but it does at least infuse it with a little more of the human emotion that might have been present in an encounter such as this. The account from Matthew is, in fact, is quite spare on details and rather matter of fact. But spare as it is, the account does make at least one thing clear. The circumstances of Jesus' birth are not the only remarkable thing that happened. God didn't just do something new in Mary. God did something new in Joseph as well.

Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man. His righteousness is first attributed to the fact that he was going to follow Jewish law and divorce Mary because she was found to be pregnant before their marriage had been finalized. In ancient Judaism, a man and a woman were engaged for almost a year before they began to live together. Being engaged they were as good as married in every respect except cohabitation.<sup>1</sup> In resolving to dismiss her, Joseph was acting in accordance with the law since he could only conclude that Mary had been unfaithful. She had apparently broken the contract between their two families, and this was grounds for divorce. Joseph was doing what was not only socially acceptable, but what was considered righteous according to the law.

Matthew also implies that Joseph was righteous not only because he was going to follow the customs of the law, but because he was going to do so quietly; thus avoiding public disgrace and quite possibly Mary's death by stoning.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=3751>

But God intervened. In the annunciation to Joseph, the Angel tells him not to be afraid, to go ahead and take Mary as his wife, and to name the baby, Jesus.”

Joseph was called to act outside and beyond cultural expectations of righteousness. He was called to act in a way that flew in the face of everything he had ever known was proper and socially acceptable in order to follow the will of God.

It reminds me of an essay I read this week about the vows priests make at their ordinations. One of them is that we will do our best to pattern our lives in accordance with the teachings of Christ, so that we may be wholesome examples to our people. In other words, examples that ought to be emulated. The author of this essay goes on to say this, “My first reaction is to call to mind a person who is carefully groomed and wearing clothes that reflect excellent taste but are clearly not all that expensive. He/she has a ready smile and meets people easily. This priest tithes to the church and still gives to many local charities, and is often asked to give the invocation at significant social events. His/her family is “Leave it to Beaver” perfect.<sup>2</sup>

What is your image of righteousness? As I was thinking about this for myself, I realized that I have two images. One is the image of the remarkably righteous, like Mother Theresa. The other is the image of everyday run of the mill righteousness. This righteousness, I fear, looks in my mind's eye like some slightly improved version of myself.

Isn't it interesting that the Holy Family – the one that God consecrated to bring Jesus into the world, was under no circumstances “Leave it to Beaver” perfect? God asked Joseph to drop all appearances and to be what it was – an unusual family with a child conceived under extraordinary and socially unacceptable circumstances.

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<sup>2</sup> A View from the Pew, (Another vow made at ordination), by A.L. Addington.

The pattern that Mary and Joseph started was in fact continued by Jesus, making it all the more clear that this new thing God did in Joseph was not an aberration. Jesus continually wreaked havoc on social conventions, reconfiguring all narrow conceptions of righteousness and infusing it with unbounded compassion and mercy. It was the tax collector, not the Pharisee who was considered righteous. It was the poor and the hungry and the persecuted who were blessed. The last thing that defined righteousness was the appearance of it according to local custom or law.

I wonder, despite biblical witnesses to the contrary, how vested we are in maintaining the appearance of righteousness – of setting about making sure that our lives are picture perfect according to some socially constructed notion that we have not only bought into but perpetuate with a vengeance.

The story of the Holy family this Christmas may not be some quaint, comfortable family scene, but one that should be jarring enough to cause us to ask ourselves what radical righteousness God is trying to birth in us this season. Are we open to having our minds changed and to take risks? To be led in new directions that might just take us out of the comfort zone of socially-acceptable appearances.

The essayist on ordination vows concluded by saying that “the ordained are faced with the paradox that being a ‘wholesome example’” according to God and following the model of Christ, “may cost them the appearance of wholesomeness.” This conclusion, however, is not limited to the ordained. It is one that we all should heed. God’s message to us is to let it go – untangle ourselves from trying to maintain the appearance of perfection – to risk losing the appearance of righteousness so that God may do a new thing in us, leading us into new lives of not just wholesomeness, but of wholeness. Let it go... and for God’s sake, be not afraid!