

May my words be spoken and heard in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

I would like to take this opportunity on behalf of Juliana, myself, Connor and Victoria, to say a big thank you to the parish for your kind and loving welcome to us.

Despite it being just a little bit hotter than Brisbane, and a lot hotter than New Zealand as Mum and Dad found out the other week. We are starting to settle in here at the parish and in Ipswich.

Although we are yet to find a good fish and chip shop, and a hair dresser, obviously for Juliana and not myself.

I look forward though, to the journey ahead and growing with you all in our prayerful relationship with God, so that we can come into a heartfelt knowledge of who Christ has called us to be in this community.

Today I want to particularly focus on the Gospel passage. Here we see the story of Jesus' birth in Matthew's Gospel through the eyes of Joseph. Unlike in Luke's Gospel where we see it through Mary's.

And even though both gospels have their differences no attempt is made to bring them into line.

The main event is the same, but instead of Luke's picture of an excited Mary learning that she is to give birth to God's messiah, Matthew shows us a more sober Joseph discovering that his fiancée is pregnant.

The point where these two stories merge together is when the angel says to Joseph, as the angel Gabriel said to Mary, "do not be afraid." And it is these four words that I want to focus on today.

But first we need to find out a bit more about Joseph and what he was going through.

Joseph is someone whom we know little about. There is only a few references to him in the gospels, like the birth, infancy and childhood of Jesus.

Yet he is a key character in the Christmas story, because in a truly humble and remarkable manner he prepares for the arrival of the Messiah, of Emmanuel “God with us”, into his life and into the world.

In Matthew’s Gospel Joseph is presented as having no part in Mary’s pregnancy, and when he discovers that Mary is pregnant he wondered how this could be. As they had not been living together as husband and wife.

One could imagine that initially he would have been confused and did not know what to do. But we hear in the Gospel that Joseph was a “righteous man.”

After discovering Mary is pregnant and knowing that the baby is not his, he knows that the Jewish law would find Mary guilty of adultery, an act that can be punished with death, and that is always punishable by shame. The Jewish law mandated that Joseph divorce her.

But because Joseph is a “righteous man”, instead of exposing Mary to “public disgrace” as the Gospel says. He decided to dismiss her quietly, in a way that would reduce public inquiry into what has happened.

I believe Joseph probably thought that he had this messy situation all figured out and that this would be fine with God. Or so he thought, that is until God intervened.

An angel appears to Joseph and speaks the same words that the angel Gabriel said to Mary, and the same words that we will hear on Christmas day in Luke’s Gospel when an angel of the Lord stood before the shepherds, and said to them “do not be afraid.” These words are typical words of heavenly reassurance.

It seems that throughout the bible God is always trying to tell us, “Do not be afraid”. According to the New Revised Standard Version of the bible, this phrase appears 78 times in the bible, 57 times in the Old Testament and Apocrypha, and 21 in the New Testament.

I believe when we hear these words, what God is saying to us is, I believe in you, I have faith in you, and in who I created you to be.

We are being reminded that fear is a human response impeding our perception of God's will and ways at work in our lives.

It is also a warning against focusing on and getting caught up in our own anxieties, which in turn can hold us back from partaking in the plan that God has for us.

We are all a little like Joseph at times. Just as he thought he had it all figured out. We too like to think that we can plan and direct our lives, we too like to think that we have the power to make choices that effect, for better or for worse, ourselves, others and the world around us.

But then this thing called life happens, or in other words God happens in our life.

Joseph thought he had all the information to plan his life, but he didn't. Instead God invited him to rediscover a larger and true purpose for him. God invited him to not be afraid, but to have faith and trust in God.

I believe Joseph shows us one of the ultimate examples of trusting God. Despite the fear he had, he trusted God's heavenly reassurance when the angel said to him "do not be afraid."

Here Joseph teaches us that he was able to let go of his deepest fear and need to control his life - so as to allow God's love to come into his heart, so that he may discover his true identity, his true self in God.

Likewise, when we admit to ourselves that we do not have all the information, it allows us the freedom to come into God's purpose for our lives. It gives us the freedom to journey with God into that sacred place within our heart where we find our true identity in God.

We each have our own ways of dealing with personal, spiritual, and professional matters, and our own ways of moving through this demanding season of the year.

But perhaps today's Gospel is reminding us of a voice that we are already aware of in our heart that says "do not be afraid, have faith in the faith I have in you, trust me."

Perhaps it is a voice we have been trying to avoid, a voice that is asking us to go beyond our own plans and choices, in order that we may surrender more fully into

the love that God has for us. So, that we too can assist in the coming of Emmanuel “God with us” in our life’s and in the life of this community.

And Just as Mary and Joseph journeyed to the first Christmas, they did not know where God would take them, all they knew was that something wonderful had been promised and that they had been beckoned to follow.

So the Gospel calls too us to not be afraid, to have faith, to trust and follow God’s call, not knowing where the journey will take us or the path that God has set before us.