

Dreaming

Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-23

Joseph seems to spend a lot of time asleep. Nine months previously, whilst working out what to do with his surprisingly pregnant wife, an angel appeared to the man and told him what his boy would be called, Immanuel, God with us, Jesus, the Saviour of the people.

After the birth, and the angels and the shepherds and the wise men, Joseph is asleep, again. This time the angel comes to warn him about Herod's murderous intentions, and to take his family and flee to Egypt.

In Egypt, as a refugee, Joseph was asleep again when an angel appeared in a dream to tell him that it was safe to return to Israel-Palestine because those seeking to kill the child were dead.

And finally, somewhere enroute from Egypt, Joseph heard that Herod's son ruled the land. Joseph, asleep again, was told to go north, to Nazareth, and settle there with his young family.

Sleepy Joe. He's traditionally portrayed as being older than Mary by a number of years, though it's not certain if this was true. And what had he been eating to have had all of those dreams? Too much sheep's milk cheese? That would do it.

Or was it a fulfilment of the prophecy from the Old Testament Book of Joel where it was foretold that, "old men shall dream dreams"?

Or was it harking back even further to another Joseph, and his amazing technicolour dream-coat, who also had dreams, Any dream will do... and who was brought into Egypt.

Our Joseph dreamed, in that twilight world between awake and asleep. The brain free-wheeling a little, the body maybe still tense from the worries and burdens of the day, and in that chasm between what to do and what not to do, the angel of God murmured, to paint pictures with words,

to suggest, to stir, to leave a trace of something not quite of this world, but startling enough to lodge in the memory. When Joseph awoke from his dreaming, he did things. He named his Son. He stayed loyal to Mary. He fled to Egypt. He made a new home in Nazareth.

If you go to Nazareth today there is a monstrously huge basilica to Mary, said to be built over the house where she lived. You've got to go round the back to find the small, dwarfed, but supportive church to Joseph, always one respectful step behind Madonna and Child. It's somehow symbolic. We hear about Joseph once more, twelve years later, looking for his missing son after a visit to the Jerusalem Temple. And then he's gone.

I've often wondered whatever happened to Joseph, the dreamer. What in the years left to him in Nazareth made him restless in his sleep of an evening? How else did God communicate? What more did he dream of?

Into the dark and birthing sky over Bethlehem; into the uncertain and alien sky over the refugee family in Egypt; into the familiar yet different sky over Nazareth, God sent stars with light, and sent wise people home by a way they might never have imagined, and a humble carpenter to a land he had never visited, and a little infant into and out of and back into safety before He was a year old. How swiftly we have travelled from 'gold, frankincense and myrrh' to a village drenched with children's blood because of the choking paranoia of a despot; to refugee status in a land of strange language and food; back to a home still under the shadow of a tyrant's son, which is no home, until at last, the Holy Family fetched up in Nazareth.

In most home and churches that have set up a manger scene the custom is to take them down, with the decorations in a few days' time. Storing them away for another year. If we had a nativity scene we'd put away the angels, for they had returned to the heavens; and put away the shepherds, they'd returned to their fields; and put away the Magi, because they had returned to

their distant home. But leave out Joseph and Mary and Jesus, move them to another location. In a corner, hiding from persecution. By a window, looking out on the larger world, the world where there is still violence and repression and terror, and where there are refugees fleeing, needing protection and not heartless condemnation or deportation. A time where dreams of hope and nightmares of reality mingle all too easily.

In the aftermath of Covid; in the ongoing horror of heartless violence in Ukraine; in the educational anti-woman mindlessness in Afghanistan and Iran; in the mind and body chilling energy crisis across the world; in the present Government's multi-billion gambling with the economy last Autumn, "I got carried away", the former chancellor said; in the future of the Church in this and every part of Scotland as we try to imagine, where there are few guidelines, what the shape of the future will look like in terms of ministries and buildings. There's plenty to give each of us a sleepless night. The mental health of the nation, also still coming to terms with the death of the Queen whose absence makes the present feel more uneasy, is awash with anxiety, depression, sleep-problems, relationship conflicts, and so on.

Is that all we have just now, a collection of nightmares to keep us awake? A world so harrowed by fear and hunger and cold and inhospitality and uncertainty that it's hard to sleep, let alone dream.

What do you dream of? What are the aspirations and hopes, the plans and forecasts, the visions, the dreams we might have for the future? How might your many nightmares, private and public, be transformed into dreams that lead to brightness and action and a positive outcome? What must you dream first, before you can do next? Can you dream of a future bigger than the past?

The odd, frequently traction less days after Christmas and the New Year allow for this kind of off-grid mental, emotional and spiritual slower time. We look at diaries and calendars and screens

which are not entirely empty, but where our dreams and fears have opportunity to stretch and expand, to shape and reshape until they become concrete or evaporate into smoke.

What do you dream of? This is beyond the realms of New Year resolution. This is the territory of thinking about how your life, your world, might shape up in the months ahead. The new job or the new relationship. The travel or the experience of something different. The task needing completed, or the lining needing drawing under. I won't give you examples, for that is your work, as you half-listen to these words and ponder what they might mean for you today, and in the days to come.

Dreaming.

It seems to me that dreams are of little use unless they lead us to attempt something or achieve something. Just as fine words butter no parsnips, airy dreams that don't land on both feet on God's good earth and turn into solid realities are of little value. After dreaming there ought to be doing. After considering the many paths and routes, we must consider the best way ahead. After the exploring of possibility, we must commit our lives to the certain. At least for a time, before it is time to dream again. Dreaming and waking are part of the same reality – it is called living.

The dream energy that directed the Magi to follow the star settled on Joseph and continued to lead to movement and freedom for change. Joseph's first dream had planned to dismiss quietly the pregnant fiancée but ended in taking her as wife and naming their child, "God with us."

Joseph's next dream hurried him from the danger of Bethlehem to the unknown danger of exile in Egypt, the old land of slavery; back out on to the edges.

Joseph's next dreams led him home, not to where he intended, but to where God placed. Joseph's dreams led to action, and not always the action he had intended, expected, or even wanted.ⁱ

What ***do*** you dream of? How has God, ***and it is God***, inserted, suggested, planted, spun the first glimmerings of an idea, an action into your sleeping/waking minds? How has God, ***and it is God***, led you to move in ways that you never could have expected? How has God, ***and it is God***, carried you and your loved ones and your Church away from darkness and death and into places of light and life?

Dreaming. We ***so*** should. Acting. We ***so*** must.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Anne H K Apple, Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol 1 pps22-24