

Christmas 1 (2019)

Before moving to Blue Ridge, I was in the State Mental Hospital in Alabama. Perhaps, I should add *doing clinical-pastoral education*.

One of my favourite residents there was a lady from north Alabama by the name of Mrs. Green. She was a Sunday School teacher in her Baptist Church . . . a really nice lady.

More than that, Mrs. Green went on to acquire something of something of celebrity status. A movie was later made about her life.

‘Celebrity’, though, might not *quite* be the right word, for you see, she was awaiting trial for killing four husbands and attempting to kill a fifth man who was on the way to be her husband.

It seems authorities became suspicious after the last man began to have mysterious symptoms and a medical workup showed he had a high-level arsenic in his body.

At that point, the bodies of her four husbands were exhumed, and it was determined that they did as well.

In the chaplains’ office, we would say: **“We enjoy visiting with Mrs. Green.”**

And then in chorus would say: **“But we wouldn’t want to have tea at her house.”**

To finish her story, since she was a small child, Mrs. Green had had this other little girl who looked just like her following her around. This other little girl would tell her to do bad thing, and she would obey. ///

Let’s shift gears now. In many, if not most cases, obedience is viewed as a positive virtue.

For example, children are frequently reminded of what the Good Book says about obeying one’s father and mother.

In her Christmas hymn, Mrs. C. F. Alexander ascribes the positive virtue of obedience to the young Jesus. She writes:

*And through all  
His wondrous childhood,  
He would honour and obey . . .*

A few lines down, she adds:

*Christian children all should be,  
Mild, obedient, good as He.*

So, to obey is normally viewed as a good thing, for children yes, but also for adults.

Case in point is Joseph whose story is told in today's Gospel. He stands as an icon of obedience.

I don't know if you have ever thought about it, but Joseph in the beginning was just as much of a dis-believer in the virgin birth as any modern-day skeptic.

That is why when Mary turned up with child, his first instinct was to put her away.

Sometimes modern-day folk talk as if the ancients could believe in miracles like the virgin birth because they were not very sophisticated and knew nothing about modern science.

If they were gullible enough to believe such things, so be it. But we are much too smart to be taken in. Let me just say: **That is a load of rubbish.**

Take Joseph, for example. He may not have had our scientific understanding, but he knew where babies came from.

That is why listening to his inner voice he was contemplating not going through with their marriage.

But, the angel revealed to him a different possibility, one just as incredible then as it is now: The child Mary was bearing was of the Lord.

But, how did he respond to the angel's message?

Well, we get our answer in verse 24 of Chapter 1 of Matthew's Gospel:

**“Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him . . .”**

He obeyed.

Was obedience a positive virtue in Joseph’s case? Of course, it was.

It put him in the company of such great men of the Bible as Abraham.

While still in idol-ridden Ur of the Chaldees, Abraham, in response to God’s call, pulled up his tent pegs and headed for the Promised Land.

His obedience led to the salvation to the world. It was out of Abraham’s line that Jesus came. More than that, Abraham himself was blessed because of his faithful obedience. St. Paul in Romans 4:3 says:

**“Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.”**

The same was true with Joseph. By doing what the angel said, he became a player in God’s plan to bring healing to the world . . . to undo the sin of Adam.

And what a privilege it was to be a co-operator with God!

How would you like have the Son of God working alongside you at your carpenter’s bench? Eating at your table? Having the privilege of teaching him how to throw a fishing rod?

Obedience is indeed a positive virtue if you are listening to the right voice.

But how do you know you are? In a word, what is required is: **discernment**.

Both Mrs. Green and Joseph remind us that you cannot obey every voice that comes into your head. Some will get you into trouble, perhaps land you in the electric chair. Others will cause you to miss out on great blessings.

So, what do you do? How do you discern rightly?

Well, James in his epistle points us in the right direction when he says: **“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God.**

Let me give you an extreme example of what I am talking about. You are a guy and you are in love with both Mary and Jane. Both are swell girls, and each would make a great wife.

One voice whispers: marry Mary. The other, marry Jane. What do you do?

Well, take your direction from James. Seek wisdom from the Lord. Ask, and it will be given you. Seek right discernment.

But, there is something that follows on from discernment. That is **doing**.

Joseph heard the angel's message and believed it came from God. He became a believer in the virgin birth. After that encounter, he could say the Creed without crossing his fingers.

But, let's suppose it had ended there. Let's suppose he had not acted on this belief, had not done what the angel commanded.

If that case, he would have missed the blessing.

But Joseph did nothing of the kind. He obeyed, and the rest his history. ///

I speak to you this morning on the eve of a new year and new decade.

I wonder what 'voices' are echoing in your head this morning?

Now, if you are hearing any like those Mrs. Green heard, please do speak to me after the service, and I will try to get you some help!

But, if God is speaking to you, prepare not only to hear but to do.

An old American Gospel song puts us on the right track when it says:

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way  
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

The songwriter is right. Resolve in 2020 to trust and obey . . . to be both a discerner and a doer.

The rest is up to God. Be assured He will do His part. Expect new opportunities and blessings. Rely on His grace to carry you over any potholes along the way.

A very happy New Year to you all!