

Sermon, Sunday 21 December 2025

Coventry Cathedral

Focus texts: *Matthew 1:18–25 / Isaiah 7:10–16*

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I begin with a confession. I love the Sunday's that precede all of the great feasts of the Church, perhaps even more than the feasts themselves. I've come to call them "Hook Sunday's" Why? Because very often, it's on those days that something shifts in the "liturgical atmosphere" as it were, that helps us appreciate the coming celebration even more and that shift is often missed because we are so fixated and rushed on celebrating the feast itself.

The same could be said about today, the Fourth Sunday in Advent.

What are today's hooks then? **THE FIRST IS A NAME.**

A name says something about who this child is and who we hope they might become.

There is a truth about names that many of the cultures represented in the Cathedral this morning will know to be true. It certainly is something African cultures understand instinctively: **names are never random.**

A name is a story.

A name carries the weather of the moment in which a child is born. It remembers joy or sorrow, hope or survival. In some communities, a name speaks of the day of birth, the season of famine or abundance, the prayers of a mother, or the circumstance that shaped the family's life at that moment.

A child might be named for resilience because life has been hard. Another might carry a name of thanksgiving because they arrived after long waiting. Some names remember loss so that it is not erased; others announce hope so that it is not forgotten.

In these traditions and cultures, to ask someone's name is not small talk- It is an invitation into their story.

Mary and Joseph understood something of this nuance. Their child's name arrived not by committee but by command. "*You are to name him Jesus,*" the angel tells Joseph, "*for he will save his people from their sins.*" The name is not chosen because it sounds right or feels meaningful. It is given, heavy with purpose.

Had they reflected on it, they would have found themselves standing deep inside Jewish history. Jesus (Greek), Yeshua (Aramaic), Joshua (Hebrew). A name echoing the leader who took God's people into the promised land. A name soaked in promise, recalling God's words to Joshua: "Do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Even before Matthew makes it explicit, the resonance is there.

God-with-us is already humming inside the name.

Matthew, though, refuses to let us miss the point. So he reaches back further still, to Isaiah's prophecy:

"The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Immanuel."

These are Isaiah's words and would have first been heard by fearful ears.

A king threatened by enemies. A nation anxious about its future. God offers a sign, not of military might or instant victory, **but of presence**. A child will be born. God will not abandon you. God will be with you in the waiting, in the uncertainty, in the unravelling.

That matters, because Isaiah's prophecy is a promise spoken into real political fear and real human vulnerability. God's answer to anxiety is **not distance but nearness**.

Not **explanation** but **incarnation**.

So when Matthew places Isaiah's words alongside the angel's command to name the child Jesus, something extraordinary happens. Two names sit side by side. **Jesus**, God saves. **Immanuel**, God with us. Christ, God's Chosen One.

And there we have it. His full Name: *Jesus Emmanuel Christ* LOL

God saves by staying. God rescues by drawing near.

The meaning of the name Jesus would have been familiar to Mary and Joseph. "God saves" was the grammar of their faith. They would have known the stories of the sea crossing, of manna falling, of exile ending. But the angel presses even further. This child will save his people **from their sins**. Not only from what threatens them from the outside, but from all that corrodes them from within. A liberation that reaches hearts, habits, cultures and whole oppressive systems. The clue is in the etymology!

And then comes the surprise that Isaiah, in our first reading already prepared us for: *the ordinariness of it all*.

Jesus was a common name. Painfully ordinary. So ordinary that when Mary called for her son in the marketplace, several other boys would likely have turned around in response or when Jesus learned how to write his name in Aramaic, there would have been other boy-children learning to spell the same name.

God chooses to fulfil an ancient, hope-filled prophecy not with a rare and shining name, but with one that blends into the crowd.

This is at the heart of "Emmanuel theology". God does not hover above human life, tagged with a name too holy to pronounce. God steps into the everyday, into the mundane.

Now hear this alongside our own moment.

We live in a society increasingly fluent in numbers and less fluent in names. Patient numbers. Reference numbers. Case numbers. User IDs. PINs. Metrics and categories that allow systems to run smoothly but often leave people feeling invisible.

Just this last week, I heard repeatedly the number of people killed in the attack in Brisbane. The number of refugees fleeing Sudan and the number of immigrants who crossed the Channel.

Names are inconvenient. Names take time. Names require attention.

Scripture keeps pushing back. God does not save a statistic. God gives a sign in the form of a child. God does not announce salvation with a code but with a name. And God insists that we use it.

When Mary and Joseph named their child Jesus, they were not just obeying an angel. They were testifying to a God who refuses anonymity, a God who steps into history not as an idea or a system, but as a named person, known and knowable.

And here is the punch that should follow us out of the door today:

If God chooses to be known by a name rather than a number, what does that say about how we are called to see one another?

The second hook is that there's something about how Joseph responds to all that's happening around them, again, easily missed in the incarnation narratives.

"There's something about Joseph."

Not much is said **by** him, and almost nothing is said **about** him.

In a Bible crowded with voices, Joseph is quiet. In a culture where men are expected to assert, explain, and control, Joseph steps back. He does not dominate the story. He makes space for it to unfold.

Joseph isn't much of a talker, he's a dreamer; but not the kind who drifts off into private spirituality. His dreams interrupt his plans. They complicate his assumptions. They cost him something. Each time God speaks, Joseph wakes up and does the next faithful thing. He takes Mary as his wife. He names the child. He flees to Egypt. He returns when it is safe. No speeches. No visible struggle for power. Just obedience translated into action.

This is not silence as withdrawal. It is silence as attentiveness. He inhabits the world as a "doer" of God's word, not a commentator on it.

That matters, especially for the Church.

For millennia, the Church has been filled with men who speak much and do little. Men fluent in doctrine, governance, and proclamation, yet resistant to the quiet, costly work of trust, care, and relinquishment. Joseph offers a disruption to that pattern. He embodies a masculinity not built on control, visibility, or voice, but on faithfulness.

Notice what Joseph does not do. He does not insist on his rights. He does not centre his reputation. He does not demand that Mary explain herself. He does not position himself as the hero of the story. He **decenters** himself so that God's promise can take flesh.

In that way, Joseph quietly challenges the deeply embedded patriarchy of our institutions and cultures. He shows us a man who exercises authority without domination, leadership without self-promotion, strength without spectacle. He protects without possessing. He obeys without being erased.

And perhaps this is the framework Joseph offers us for inhabiting the world today. Not a call to be silent in the face of injustice, but a call to be reflective before we speak. We just came out of the 16 days of activism against Gender-based violence. Now the hard work of the other 349 other days begins.

Joseph reminds us that the kingdom of God does not always advance through speeches and strategies. Sometimes it arrives through people who listen deeply, trust bravely, and then get up and do what love requires.

"There's something about Joseph". And the Church and society would do well to pay attention.

So we are left today with two quiet, world-shaping gifts: **a name, and a way of living.**

A name that refuses abstraction and insists on relationship. And God entrusts that name to Joseph, a man who does not talk it into existence but lives it into the world.

The name reveals who God is. Joseph's obedience shows us how that truth takes flesh. Together, they tell us that God's kingdom does not arrive through slogans or speeches, but through practiced faithfulness.

When we truly awaken, we practice our way into the life and world we want for ourselves and others.

If you want peace, do peaceful things.

If you want justice, do just things.

If you want nonviolence, do nonviolent things.

If you want hope, do hopeful things.

If you want love, do loving things.

This is the good news entrusted to us: a God who comes close enough to be named, and a faith strong enough to be lived. Like Joseph, may we listen deeply, rise quietly, and do the work that allows God-with-us to be seen, spoken, and recognised by name.