

Christmas 1 (2025)

Many of you have heard some of my tales from the mental institution . . . when I was there prior to ordination doing clinical-pastoral education.

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

More than that, Mrs. Green went on to gain something of celebrity status. She was the subject of at least one book and a number of news articles.

‘Celebrity’, though, might not *quite* be the right word, for you see, she was awaiting trial for killing three husbands and attempting to kill another 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 previous husbands were exhumed, and it was determined they did as well. She may have killed a sister-in-law as well. I can't remember if she was convicted on that count or not.

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

And then in chorus the whole group would respond: **“But we wouldn't want to have tea at her house.”**

To finish her story, Mrs. Green claimed that since she was a small child a little girl who looked just like her followed her around telling her to do bad thing, and she would obey. I will come back to Mrs. Green in a minute.

In many cases, obedience is viewed as a positive virtue. For example, children are frequently reminded of what the Good Book says about obeying 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, a positive virtue, for children yes, but also for adults.

Joseph in today's Gospel is a good example.

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 people today 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 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, as a rational thinker, he was contemplating not going through with the 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 God. It was according to a prophecy found in Isaiah 7:14: **“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel”**

But how did Joseph 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. He went through with the marriage. He became Jesus’ earthly father.

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

It put him in the company with 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, a land he had never seen.

His obedience led to the salvation to the world. It was from Abraham's family that Jesus came. More than that, Abraham himself was blessed because of his obedience. St. Paul says as much in Romans 4:3:

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

The same was true with Joseph. By believing 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 to 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 fly rod (if they existed in those days)?

Obedience is indeed a positive virtue if you are listening to the right voice, as both Abraham and Joseph did.

But how do you know you are?

Returning to Mrs. Green, she reminds us that you cannot listen to every voice that comes into your head. Some will get you into trouble, perhaps land you in prison for life.

So, how do you know you are listening to the right voice? How can you have right discernment?

One way is to try the ‘voices’ by God’s Word Written. If, for example, you hear a voice telling you to poison your spouse, you have only to remember the command: Thou shalt not kill.

In like manner, if you are tempted to pinch a candy bar from the neighbourhood market, there again, you have the command: Thou shalt not steal.

Not all dilemmas, however, are so straightforward, as I am sure you know. The Bible can be twisted to justify a host of wrong things.

And, indeed, there are other matters on which the Bible does not give us direct instruction.

That is why, no doubt, James in his Epistle, gives us further instruction in this matter: **“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. In matters great and small, seek right discernment.

But there is something that follows on from this discernment. That is what I was talking about earlier . . . obedience.

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 supposed it had ended there. Let's suppose that 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 as a new year is almost here.

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, if you have sought discernment, prepare not only to hear but to do. Obedience is the golden key that opens the casket to all God's blessings.

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 2025 to trust and obey . . . to be both a right discerner and a right doer.

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

A very happy New Year to you all!