



Fourth Sunday of Advent December 19, 2010 A

ST. JOSEPH—THE QUIET ONE WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM HIM

In the Holy Family, Jesus and Mary receive all the attention. Poor Joseph, the one who never utters a word in the four gospels, hardly receives any attention. And yet we can learn much from him. In her published book, *In Steadfast Love*, Sr. Melanie Svoboda has a lovely chapter on St. Joseph. She writes:

*Some might be wondering, what does this first century Palestinian Jew have to say to us who are twenty-first century American Christians? Although Joseph could say many things to us, I have chosen **three**.*

- ***It's okay to take a back seat.***

One thing that Joseph teaches us is that it is okay to take a back seat. John's gospel doesn't mention Joseph at all. Mark's gospel mentions him only obliquely, referring to Jesus as the "carpenter's son." In Luke's gospel the focus is on Mary with Joseph decidedly taking a back seat. Only in Matthew's gospel is Joseph given any real attention. And this attention underscores the fact that Joseph was a fairly ordinary human being. In fact, we can say that he was an ordinary man living in an ordinary village during ordinary times. Joseph's ordinariness is reflected in many traditional paintings of the first Christmas where he is often pictured off to the side or in the background. Joseph did not need to be center stage. Rather he was content to play a supporting role in the great drama of salvation. Being where God wanted him to be was more important to him than being where he wanted to be. Being faithful was more important than being popular or powerful.

Sometimes in life we are center stage. This is not bad, of course. But sooner or later we may be asked to step out of the limelight and into the wings. Perhaps a change in ministry, an illness, or the natural aging process may cause us to let go of a previously "starring" role. How do we handle such a change? Are we satisfied to play a supporting role or do we insist on being center stage? How strong is our need to be needed?

- ***Joseph allowed God to shatter his world.***

The Annunciation turned Mary's life upside down. It also turned Joseph's life upside down. Mary's pregnancy initially caused Joseph unspeakable anguish, an anguish that was assuaged only by the visit of an angel during the night. Even after the angel left him, Joseph still had to believe that Mary's child was no ordinary child but the "Son of the Most High." Joseph was never given a manual on "How to Raise a Messiah." No, Joseph had to learn "on the job" through patient trial and error. Like us, he had to learn how to live by living. He had to learn to trust God even when circumstances were unsettling or unclear.

Theologian Karl Rahner, S.J., has said: "If God's incomprehensibility does not...call us out of the little house of our homely, close-hugged truths...we have misunderstood the words of Christianity." Time and again Joseph was called out of the small world of his own making and into the wider world of God's ultimate incomprehensibility. Joseph had to let go of his preconceived ideas in order to embrace the expansiveness of a God whose ways are always beyond our imagining. During Advent we might want to reflect on a time when our world was shattered. What was that shattering experience like for us? What did God call us to do in that situation?

- ***Joseph handled fear and tension pretty well.***

The gospels make it clear that Joseph did not live a carefree life. On the contrary, his life was filled with grave fears and unrelenting tension. The trip to Bethlehem was no pleasant excursion into the countryside; rather it was an arduous trek across inhospitable lands with a wife who was nine months pregnant. The flight into Egypt had to be traumatic. We catch a glimpse of what this upheaval must have been for Joseph when we see the terror-stricken faces of today's refugees in our newspapers and on television. Even a happy occasion when he and Mary found their son Jesus in the Temple was preceded by three days and nights of unspeakable agony for Joseph. Added to these fears and tension were the daily trials of a man trying to scratch out a living for his wife and son in a country subjected to the cruel domination of a foreign military power.

The gospels lead us to believe that Joseph bore the tension with considerable grace. Through all the ups and downs of his life, he clung to what really mattered: his belief in a God who was both powerful and good. Joseph's hope lay not in developing his own intellectual prowess, not in having the best religious and political leaders, not in finding the perfect community. No, his hope lay in the mercy and fidelity of God. How gracefully am I bearing the fears and tension of my own life? What might help me to bear them more gracefully? In what or in whom does my hope lie?

Michael Card has written a beautiful song entitled, "Joseph's Song"; many of us are familiar with it. The song captures both Joseph's apprehension and his awe at the birth of Jesus. "How can it be?" he muses over and over again. We too find ourselves asking the same question. "How can it be?" when we see our world reeling from war and terrorism. "How can it be?" when we encounter injustices within our church and our community. "How can it be?" when we experience again and again our own sinfulness despite our best efforts and resolve.

But we also ask in awe, "How can it be?" when we see strangers risking their lives to save strangers, when we witness the compassionate love within our church and our community, and when we experience again and again the grace to say "I'm sorry" and "I forgive." During this Advent/Christmas Season, my prayer for all of us is that we may learn from Saint Joseph, this ordinary man, this befriender of fear and tension, who ultimately found his peace and fulfillment in the incomprehensibility of a totally loving God." (End of Sr. Melanie's reflections on St. Joseph.)

Three other comments on St. Joseph

- The Bible tells us that Joseph was a "just man." This means, among other things, that he was completely open to God's will and to all that God wanted to do for him. He became holy by totally opening his heart to God and by living his very ordinary, quiet humdrum life in a God-centered way.
- The Bible tells us nothing of Joseph in the years after the return to Nazareth except the incident of finding Jesus in the Temple (see Luke 2:41-51). Perhaps this can be taken to mean that God wants us to realize that the holiest family was like every other family, that the circumstances of life for the holiest family were like those of every family, so that when Jesus' mysterious nature began to emerge, people couldn't believe that he came from such humble beginnings: "Is he not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother named Mary?"

(Matthew 13:55a). It was almost as indignant as "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46b).

- Speaking about St. Joseph, St. Bernardine of Siena writes: "He was chosen by the eternal Father as the trustworthy guardian and protector of his greatest treasures, namely, his divine Son and Mary, his wife. He carried out this vocation with complete fidelity until at last God called him, saying: 'Good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord.'"

PRAYER TO ST. JOSEPH

O blessed Joseph,
faithful guardian of my Redeemer, Jesus Christ,
protector of thy chaste spouse,
the virgin Mother of God,
I choose thee this day
to be my special patron and advocate
and I firmly resolve to honor thee
all the days of my life.
Therefore I humbly beseech thee
to receive me as thy client,
to instruct me in every doubt,
to comfort me in every affliction,
to obtain for me and for all
the knowledge and love of the Heart of Jesus,
and finally to defend and protect me
at the hour of my death.
Amen.

Have a blessed week,

Le Sarah