



Fourth Sunday of Advent A December 22, 2019

- ◆ **St. Joseph, the quiet one, what we can learn from him**
- ◆ **The Rosary, a gift from Heaven**

In the Holy Family, Jesus and Mary receive all the attention. Poor Joseph, who never utters a word in the four Gospels, hardly gets noticed. But we can learn much from Joseph, who is featured in this Sunday's Gospel and in the Christmas Eve Gospel. In her excellent 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 reflections 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 is like every other family, that the circumstances of life for the holiest Family are like those of every family, so that when Jesus' mysterious nature began to emerge, people could not 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 wrote: "*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.

THE ROSARY, A WONDERFUL WAY TO PRAY FOR GLOBAL AND PERSONAL INTENTIONS

Like many of you of my generation raised in the 40's and 50's, the Rosary was an important part of our prayer life. My family prayed the Rosary *every evening*. If travelling in the evening, we prayed the Rosary as we drove in the car. For many decades, the Rosary was not a part of my spirituality. But now for a good few years, I am back to praying the Rosary every day. I usually pray it as I travel around the parish—a couple of decades here and a couple of decades there.

I *always* pray for particular intentions as I pray every decade. The intentions for the most part are connected to the 20 Mysteries of the Rosary. For example, as I pray the First Glorious Mystery, *The Resurrection* (Sundays and Wednesdays), I thank God for the hope of eternal life that Jesus' Resurrection gives us. Since the Resurrection is Jesus's defeat of evil, I also pray for all who are fighting the forces of evil in our world, e.g., hunger, poverty, human trafficking, abortion.

For the first Sorrowful Mystery of the Rosary, *The Agony in the Garden* (Mondays and Fridays), I pray for all those suffering in mind, body and spirit, and for those who are trying to help them. I often add here and there the intentions of all those who have asked me to pray for them.

For a full list of the intentions connected to all 20 Mysteries, see my writings on the Parish website and scroll down to *Miscellaneous Articles*. You will find there not only the intentions, but also the scriptural references to all 20 Mysteries and the days on which each set of mysteries should be said.

Those of you who have my book on Prayer can see my chapter on the Rosary.

In his spiritual classic, *True Devotion to Mary*, St. Louis de Montfort wrote: “*The holy rosary is a gift come down from heaven; a great present that God gives to His most faithful servants. God is the Author of the prayers of which it is composed and of the mysteries it contains.*”

In his *Apostolic Letter* on the Rosary (October 2002), the late Pope John Paul II shared with us his special love for the Rosary when he wrote: “*The Rosary has accompanied me in moments of joy and in moments of difficulty. To it I have entrusted any number of concerns: in it I have always found comfort. The Rosary is my favorite prayer. It is marvelous in its simplicity and its depths*” (Para. #2).

During her many apparitions here on earth, our Blessed Mother has encouraged us to pray the Rosary. Her exhortation alone should be reason enough for us to seek to develop a love for this form of prayer.

The late Fr. Anthony de Mello, S. J., once wrote: “*Until the next life we shall not realize how the destinies of persons and nations have been shaped, not so much by the external actions of powerful people and by events that seemed inevitable, but by the quiet, silent, irresistible daily prayer of persons the world will never know.*”

People often ask us to pray for them. I am sure we tell them that we will keep their particular need in prayer. But do we? Do we pray for those for whom we said we would? A decade of the Rosary is one simple way to keep our promise of praying for the special intentions of friends and strangers and for many, many other global needs.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE GLORIOUS FEAST OF GOD BECOMING MAN

Fr. Karl Rahner, SJ, wrote: “*God has entrusted his last, deepest, and most beautiful Word to the world, in the Word made flesh. This Word says: ‘I love you world,*

man and woman. I am here. I am with you. I am your life. I am your time. I weep your tears. I am your joy. Do not be afraid. When you do not know how to go any further, I am with you. I am in your anguish, because I suffered it myself. I am in your need and your death, because today I began to live and to die with you. I am your life. I promise you: for you, too, life is waiting. For you, too, the gate will open.”

Meister Eckhart, 1260-1327, a mystic and theologian wrote: “*Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus, as God-made-man in time; but if his birth is not ‘reproduced’ in my soul, what advantage is this celebration to me?*” His thought was later developed by another mystic, **Angelo Silesio**, who wrote: “*Even if Christ were to be born a thousand times in Bethlehem, but is not born in my soul, I am lost forever.*”

It is obvious, therefore, that besides the physical birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, there is also the *spiritual birth* of Jesus, which takes place in our soul. This is what we call the *Christmas of the soul*, as opposed to the external Christmas celebrations comprising all our Christmas activities—from writing Christmas cards to putting up decorations and organizing parties. It is the spiritual birth that affects our soul and enables us to partake of the eternal salvation that Jesus brought to us through his birth.

Thomas Merton wrote:

Into this world, this demented Inn,
in which there is absolutely no room for him at all,
Christ has come uninvited.
But because he cannot be at home in it,
because he is out of place in it,
and yet must be in it,
his place is with those others
for whom there is no room.
His place is with those who are discredited,
who are denied the status of persons,
who are tortured, bombed and exterminated.
With those for whom there is no room,
Christ is present in the world.
He is mysteriously present in those for whom
there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.

A Big Thank You

A big thank you to all who have worked to make our Advent and Christmas Masses special: our choirs, musicians and cantors, Katie Gander, our Director of Music & Liturgy, our sacristans who set up our Eucharistic table for us, our Readers, Eucharistic Ministers, Ushers, Sound Technicians and Altar Servers.

If you live in the area and do not normally come to church, please know we are *less* than we could be without your presence and participation.

If you have issues you would like to talk to a priest about, I hope you would not hesitate to contact Fr. Martin Fitzgerald at rmartinfitz@gmail.com or me.

If you think other people might enjoy this column, please forward it to them. Also for those visiting, please know I have many writings on our Parish website. If the **Mass** is something you are not familiar with and would like to know more about it, you may want to get a copy of my book: *A Simple Explanation of the Mass—A Step by Step Commentary on the Mass*.

A blessed Christmas,

Fr. Sean

