



SAINT 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 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 cause 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, SJ, 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.

This is the end Sr. Melanie’s reflections on St. Joseph. Her book *In Steadfast Love* is published by Twenty-Third Publications. A couple of years ago Sister gave a parish mission at Ascension. This past fall, Sr. Melanie was very ill. Please pray for her full recovery.

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 appear, 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. Bernadine 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, Joseph’s 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’”

A Five Minute Daily Devotional

It is an excellent spiritual practice to have a daily devotional book that can help us to get our day off to good start, though, of course, some folks make do a daily devotional at some other time of the day. There are 96—fifteen minute periods in every day. Is it too much to ask that we give the One who holds us in being every moment of every day one fifteen minute. If initially that seems too much start with five minutes.

One can find lots of *Daily Devotional* books in Christian book stores. If you were in church during the *Advent Season* you heard me speak about the Daily Devotional called *Vision 2000* by Fr. Mark Link, SJ. So the following pitch is for those of you who do not come to Ascension and never heard about Fr. Link’s daily devotional.

I enjoy Fr. Link’s daily devotional for three reasons.

- *They are based on our liturgical year.* They are an excellent aid for anyone wishing to pray along with the church as she places before us the scriptures we read in church. Each daily devotional is built around one scripture verse from the readings that we hear proclaimed in church every day. Fr. Link has three daily devotional books, one for each of our three liturgical cycles. This year we are in Cycle A.
- *Fr. Link’s daily devotionals are thought provoking.* He usually tells a story to help us connect the scripture verse with our daily lives. In a moment you can read a sample.
- *Fr. Link’s devotional books are brief.* One can read one of his devotionals in less than minute. But, of course, it is most desirable that we take more than a minute to sit with each devotional.

Each devotional has a verse of scripture, usually a story, a question for reflection and it ends with another quote from scripture or from some famous writer.

A Sample Devotional

[Jesus said,] “Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit.” Matthew 11:28-29

Thomas Merton’s writings still impact the thinking of our world. One day, while he was sitting outside, He writes:

“It would not go away, until, needing my hand, I blew it lightly [and it fluttered off into the woods].” There’s something beautifully gentle about that image. It’s something Jesus might have done.

The gentleness of Jesus inspires me to inventory my own life: How gentle am I in dealing with people and with the things of nature?

The Lord says...

"I have filled [my servant] with my spirit...

He will not break off a bent reed nor put out a flickering lamp."

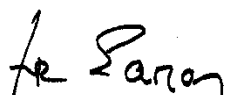
Isaiah 42:1, 3

We may still have some copies of Cycle A's daily devotional *Vision 2000* at the office. You can also get a copy of it as Amazon.com.

If you are visiting us from somewhere else or live in the area and do not attend Ascension and enjoyed this column, please know that you can find my weekly column on our parish website; ascensioncatholic.net. Click on Pastor's Column. If you have been away from church and have some big or small desire to return and have some questions, please feel free to contact myself or one of our other pastoral team members mentioned on the front of this bulletin.

Finally, a big thank you to all who in any way helped to make our Advent and Christmas liturgies special.

In Christ,



Other Beautiful thoughts to reflect on

The late **Fr. Karl Rahner, J.S.** famous theologian, said the following in a Christmas homily.

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 Eckhar, 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 Sitesio, 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 a *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 comprised of all our Christmas activities from the writing of Christmas cards to the Christmas decorations and parties. It is this spiritual birth that affects our soul and enables us to partake of the eternal salvation that Jesus brought to us through his birth.

Christian Rossetti writes:

*What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring Him a lamb;
If I were a wise man,
I would do my part;
But what can I give Him?
Give Him my heart.*

