

The Godfather

Dear friends loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We just sang a lovely hymn that proclaims God's amazing grace to the Virgin Mary in his choosing her to play such an essential and pivotal role in his great plan of salvation. I have to tell, though, that I chose that hymn was because I couldn't find one that had much to say about her betrothed husband, Joseph, who is the main focus of today's Gospel reading. There is a reason for that: no one writes hymns about Joseph. He tends to be, as I said earlier, the forgotten member of the Holy Family.

That's understandable to some degree. It's right that we celebrate Mary, for it is through her alone with no aid from Joseph, that the Son of God became flesh. It's right too that we honor her for her willingness to surrender her will and really, *to sacrifice her own body* to serve the Lord by playing her part in the plan of salvation. Besides having the all important pedigree of the right family line, these are the qualities that stand out in her. So it's easy to see why she was chosen by God for the special favor he gave her in making her the mother of our Lord.

But let me suggest the same is largely true of Joseph. I mean, these days when a couple in the church has a child, they look for the right sort of people to appoint as baptismal sponsors. To be asked to serve in this capacity is something of an honor, because parents want to choose people they know to be faithful and responsible because they're entrusting to them the spiritual care and Christian training of their child especially in the event that the parents die or for some other reason cannot fulfill this all important duty. In the not too distant past it was naturally assumed that baptismal sponsors, or "godparents" as we say, would also become the legal guardians and adoptive parents of a child in such a case – making the *careful* selection of godparents all the more vital. And because biblically *men* are the ones held primarily responsible for headship, discipline, and spiritual leadership in the home, when you get right down to it, the person a couple should want to select with the *most* care and deliberation is the one they ask to be godfather of their child.

I can't imagine that our heavenly Father was less discerning when he chose Joseph to be the godfather of his only begotten Son. And I like thinking of Joseph as Jesus' godfather, because it's true in two different senses: on one hand Joseph is the man called upon to be responsible for Jesus – a child biologically not his own – to raise him to manhood, and to bring him up in the holy faith. On the other hand, the child he's called to raise *is* God in human flesh – so Joseph really is God's earthly father. So, in choosing Joseph for this task, my contentions is that the Lord must have seen in Joseph the peculiar qualities and virtues he was looking for. And I think if we spend some time analyzing what little the Bible does say about Joseph, we will discover that like his great ancestor David he was a man after God's own heart.

So, what does the Bible tell us about Joseph? First, that he was a direct descendant of King David. To be more precise, he was descended from the line of kings that ruled over Israel and later just the land of Judah from about 960 BC until the time of the Greek conquest under Alexander the Great a little over six hundred years later, after which time the land was ruled over by foreigners. So, by the time Joseph came along, the illustrious royal family of which he was member had been out of power for over three hundred years. That there isn't a lot of money to be made in being an out-of-power royal explains why Joseph earned his living as a carpenter – a profession which in that day would have ensured a modest income.

We also know that Joseph was a man who took his faith seriously. Our text calls him a just man, which means a lot more than that he was fair-minded. No, when the Bible calls someone *just* it means that they had faith in the Word and promises of God. We can therefore be sure that Joseph was a regular at synagogue, that he knew the Scriptures, and that he went to Jerusalem to sacrifice and worship at the required pilgrim festivals. And we can say that he lived out his faith. I mean, it's interesting to me that when the angel came to Mary to tell her of her delicate condition, she was awake. But on the three separate occasions that the angel speaks to Joseph, it is always through a dream. As I considered this, it made me think at first that Joseph was probably a Lutheran at heart, because every time God wants to tell him something, he's sound asleep. But then I realized that when God told him to do something, he always did it at once without asking a lot of questions, which means that there's no way he could have been a Lutheran. But he was faithful nevertheless, and we can see that he put his faith into action.

Though it's never specifically stated anywhere, I think too we can infer from what the Bible doesn't say that Joseph was a typical man. What do I mean? Just this: whereas the Scriptures record quite a few things that Mary has to say – she's almost gabby at times – we don't have a single word written down for us that was spoken by Joseph. You may draw your own conclusions.

Okay, the other thing we about Joseph is that he was betrothed to Mary. But marriage customs were different back then so it requires some explanation. What this means is that Joseph had jumped through lots of hoops first to prove himself worthy and then to ask for Mary's hand in marriage. That both her parents and she had agreed tells us that Joseph was successful in his pursuit. So now the couple was officially and formally engaged in a ceremony that was witnessed and confirmed by the elders of Nazareth. Legally now, according to Jewish law, they were married; but they wouldn't come together to live as husband and wife until the actual wedding that would normally be scheduled to take place some six months or so after their official engagement. The purpose of this waiting period was twofold. First, it was to demonstrate that Mary wasn't already pregnant, and that therefore any children resulting from their union would indeed be Joseph's. The second purpose was to give the couple opportunity to spend some supervised time together to allow their love to grow and perhaps to heighten the anticipation of the joy they would soon share in their lives together as husband and wife.

So this was Joseph's frame of mind during this time period: he had found the girl of his dreams and had successfully won her hand and promise of marriage. He loved her, she loved him, and he was looking forward to a fulfilling future with her. That is, of course, until the day that Joseph received some devastating news. We are not told how Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy; but it isn't hard to imagine how he would have handled it. Obviously there would have been a lot of pain and a deep sense of betrayal: here the woman he pledged to love for life, who had so convincingly promised to do the same for him, the woman with whom he planned to make a family, and in whom he had invested his hopes and dreams ... she turned out to be something different than he thought. He had opened his heart to her and she broke it. His spirit crushed and his dreams shattered, it's only natural that Joseph would have been angry and resentful.

And there's more reason for this. It's a little hard to understand because our culture is a lot less patriarchal than that of first century Palestine; but there are some cultures today that preserve a little of what I'm talking about. In Brazil where I lived for a while (and you'll find this is true in most Latin cultures) the very worst insult you could hurl at a man was the accusation

that his wife was unfaithful. In our minds, we'd think "Well, that's on her – she's the problem, not him." But that isn't the way they look at it. In a very patriarchal culture like this would have been, it's a public humiliation for *him*. It implies that he is not in control of the things he's supposed to be in control of. He's not a real man. So from Joseph's perspective, Mary's apparent infidelity is not just a source of heartbreak and pain over love lost (as if that weren't enough), it also heaps dishonor and disgrace on him. He has all the more reason to be angry.

Beyond that, because Joseph was a faithful Jew, he knew that he had a moral obligation. The Law of Moses clearly dictated what to do in such a case. Because Mary was legally his wife and the child was not his, this was an open and shut case of adultery. The Law required that Mary (and her paramour if she would name him) be exposed and put to death by stoning. However, it must be remembered that the Romans ruled the land. And they reserved the authority to judge capital cases themselves. But adultery wasn't a capital offense in Roman law, and the Jews knew that – so they would not have taken this case to them. Instead, they would have done the next best thing, and that is to treat Mary as if she were dead. No one would have spoken to her or even looked at her. She would have been driven out of Nazareth and left to fend for herself someplace where no one knew of her disgrace.

So taking things together, from Joseph's perspective it looks like this: His one true love has broken faith with him. The pain of it is unbearable. And she's deceived him. She pretended to be so pious and chaste when with him; and here she's been giving herself to another all along. He feels cheated and indignant. And he's been humiliated. When word gets out, he'll be the laughingstock of the county. He knows what he must do: to be faithful to his God and begin to clear his good name he must go to the elders of Nazareth, denounce Mary, and press charges so that she will be condemned and cast out as one who is dead.

But Joseph doesn't want to do that. And here is where we see in Joseph some of God's own heart. Despite the agony of the betrayal, the humiliation he must endure, and the Law of God itself, Joseph loves Mary. He has a heart full of compassion for her and he wants to find a way to save her. Joseph is a living example of what the Lord means when he says, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." We're told that he was thinking about divorcing her quietly; and the word used there for "divorce" is interesting. It literally means to "set free" or "send away". In the context of marriage it means divorce – but in other contexts it means "to forgive", as in "setting people free from sin". Its dual meaning comes into play here because in thinking about divorcing her quietly, it shows that he has already forgiven her. Were he to do this, Mary could just sort of disappear into her father's house or their extended family for a while. She could have the baby, move some other place and pretend to be a widow or something. Whatever. Her disgrace could have been covered up and her life could have been more or less normal.

It was while reflecting on this course of action that Joseph dozed off to sleep. Then he was given another way to solve the problem. An angel appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." The angel's words make us ask, what was Joseph *afraid* of? Two things come to mind. First, was the prospect of having an unfaithful wife. It seems that Joseph had considered this option – just going ahead and marrying her anyway. But her apparent infidelity was too great an obstacle to overcome. Since she had proven so untrustworthy, how could he ever trust her again? To try to build a happy marriage on such a shaky foundation and to be constantly plagued by doubts would not have worked for Joseph. Even though he had forgiven her, he feared that he could never again trust her. The angel's assurance that Mary had done no wrong set Joseph's mind at ease. The things he had naturally assumed about her were all wrong.

But he likely had another fear, and that's the damage that would be done to his own reputation. Joseph, you will remember, was a just man. If he took Mary in her present condition, he would be tried and convicted in the court of public opinion as a fornicator. The logical conclusion the community would draw was that Joseph himself was the father of the child, and that the couple had "jumped the gun", so to speak, and consummated their marriage before the proper time. This would not have been adultery, which involves sexual intimacy with a married person who is not your spouse – and offense that was punishable by death; but rather fornication, which is inappropriate contact between people who in any way are not fully and officially married. The shame and penalty for the sin of fornication fell on the man who was involved and it required that he marry the woman and pay a hefty fine to her family for disgracing her. What this means is that a way to clear Mary's name altogether and protect and keep her, was for Joseph to step forward, take the blame on himself, and pay the fine. This is what Joseph did.

And here we see God's solution to the problem of human sin and unfaithfulness played out in Joseph's actions. We are the sinners who have broken the covenant with God. He's brokenhearted over our betrayal. According to his own law, which even he cannot break because he is just, we should be cast away from him forever. But the Lord doesn't want to do this. He loves us and has compassion on us. But the only way to clear us of the charges against us and keep us as his own, is for him to take the blame and pay the price of our sin himself.

Of course, in Joseph we see only a shadow of this truth. In compliance with the Lord's directions, Joseph went on to bear the shame and pay the price of one apparent sin that never really happened. But that will not be true of the child whose very presence caused this story to unfold as it did. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of bearing the shame and disgrace of all the world's real sins, and paying for them with his innocent life and bitter death on the cross. That's why the angel told Joseph to give him the name Jesus, which means, "The Lord saves". His presence in Joseph's life made the difference. It was believing in the promise of the salvation he would bring that made Joseph a just man. And it's also that which gave him a heart full of forgiveness and compassion that was of mirror of God's own heart.

The same is true for us today. The presence of Christ in and with us, and the trust we have in him and the power of his love and forgiveness enables us to do for each other what Joseph's actions did for Mary. Because God has forgiven us in Christ, we are enabled to forgive and hide the shame of others and deal compassionately with them. We are given the grace to protect their reputations even at the expense of our own, and to gladly suffer consequences if need be, rather than expose them to disgrace. May we then, like Joseph the Godfather of our Lord, do the same for others to the glory of God our Father in heaven. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria