



December 18, 2022

Fourth Sunday of Advent

"Joseph her husband...was a righteous man..." Matthew 1:19



Dear Friends,

Two years ago, Pope Francis commemorated the 150th anniversary of St Joseph being named as Patron of the Universal Church. In his pastoral letter, *"With a Father's Heart"* Francis describes Joseph as a *"beloved father, a tender and loving father, an obedient father, an accepting father; a father who is courageous, a working father, a father in the shadows."* Our understanding of Joseph is rooted in the Gospel of Matthew.

In the birth stories of Jesus, the Gospel of Matthew gives emphasis to the person of Joseph. It is Joseph who will give legitimacy to Jesus to claim to be of the House of David. The Messiah had to be a descendant of David. Joseph is the just man who makes it possible to proclaim Jesus as Messiah.

The Jewish sense of justice is not an abstract or individualistic virtue. To be just in the Jewish sense is to be rooted in the Covenant with God and God's people. It means right standing and the consequent behavior required within the community. It is based on the faithfulness of God to both justice and mercy. In our story Joseph models this behavior.

For us to grasp the meaning of Matthew, we need to understand its cultural context. In the ancient Mediterranean world marriages were arranged by the families. Mothers negotiated the contract which would be ratified by the fathers. The ideal marriage partner is your first cousin. Marriages were for the political and economic advantages for the families. The bride did not expect love, companionship, or comfort. Betrothal is not the same as our idea of engagement before marriage. Betrothal was the initial phase of the marriage process. To break a betrothal required a formal decree of divorce even though the couple never lived together. And relations with a betrothed woman was adultery.

Joseph has a predicament when he finds out that Mary is pregnant. He was probably last to know in the village. The women would be the first to know because Mary was not participating in the required monthly rituals for menstruating women. The women would then tell their husbands and eventually word would filter down to Joseph. This would shame Joseph.

In this shame-based society this could be an explosive situation. Joseph could not only divorce Mary which would shame her parents. Remember, it could destroy the extended family, Mary's parents were most probably Joseph's uncle and aunt. It also threatened the life of Mary who could be legally a victim of honor-killing—she could be stoned to death. The whole village could be torn apart since everyone is related by blood or marriage.

This is where the righteousness of Joseph comes into the story. He does not nurture his male pride. Instead, he thinks of the ramifications of his decisions on the whole community. He knows it is not right to take what belongs to another so he will not claim the child. He decides to quietly divorce Mary, He hopes then that the rightful father would step forward to marry Mary and claim her child.

Also, the righteousness of Joseph is revealed by his willingness to do the will of God. God reveals in a dream that God is the source of Mary's pregnancy. God reveals the gender to be male (this is a highly prized gift in this culture). And God gives Joseph the name he is to call the child. This bestows honor on Jesus and enhances Joseph's honor, for God would not honor a shameful person. God's plans surpass our human calculations. Joseph is called to faith in God's plan. And Joseph is obedient.

Like Joseph we are called to righteous behavior. We are called to be guardians of God's people. We cannot nurture personal grudges or play the role of perpetual wounded victim. In difficult situations with others, we must discern the will of God. We must seek to do the thing which will nurture the best for all involved leading to healing and harmony. St Joseph pray for us!

Peace,

Fr Ron

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