

Faithfulness of St. Joseph; A man of Quiet Strength

The Gospel of St. Matthew 1:18-25

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tradition has it that Joseph was a simple man of an honourable trade: A carpenter from Nazareth. Sometimes you see Sunday school pictures showing him in a wood shop making furniture. But "carpenter" in Joseph's day referred to a wide range of trades. Joseph could have just as easily worked with metal or stone, as with wood. The regional capital, Sepphoris, was under construction during this time, and it was within walking distance of Nazareth. It's possible that Joseph was one of the stone masons there.

In any case, craftsmen worked with strong shoulders and callused hands. They were educated by apprenticeship. Their place was respectable but not on one of the higher rungs of the social ladder. Remember the flap in the synagogue in Nazareth when Jesus preached his first sermon? The elders raised their eyebrows and asked, "Isn't this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judah, and Simon?" (Mark 6:3)

Jesus' father was neither a rabbi nor a scribe nor one of the civic leaders. He had but two qualifications to play a part in the Christmas drama – he was a descendent of David and, for whatever reason, he was God's choice. In this regard, I like to think that Joseph is someone with whom we can all identify – **a common man who dared to be obedient to God's will for his life.**

His place in the Christmas story, of course, is that of Mary's husband. According to Matthew, Joseph and Mary were "betrothed," but not yet married. William Barclay explains that there were three steps in a Jewish marriage: **The engagement**, which was often arranged by the parents through a matchmaker when the boy and girl were children; **the betrothal**, which was a formal ratification of the marriage-to-be, usually done a year before the couple was married; and **the wedding** itself, which lasted a whole week, at which time the marriage was consummated. During the betrothal, the couple was legally bound to each other so that, if the man died before the actual wedding took place, the woman was considered to be a widow. They were actually referred to as husband and wife, though they refrained from having sexual relations.

It is at this particular stage in their relationship that Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant and, though the scripture is not specific at this point, I think it is safe to say he probably blew a gasket. Like any husband-to-be, Joseph would have been beside himself to learn that his fiancé was pregnant. He would have been angry and upset, to say the least. After all, if Mary were pregnant, the only explanation would have been that she had been unfaithful, in which case, he had a legal right to have her stoned to death.

It is at this point that Joseph proves his faithfulness, first to Mary and then, more importantly, to God. According to Matthew, when Joseph learned that Mary was

pregnant, he was "not willing to make her a public example, intended to put her away secretly." (Matthew 1:19)

Joseph was a man of quiet strength. He was a man of integrity, true to his convictions. Yet, he was compassionate and considerate of others. He found himself in a no-win situation. He could not, in good conscience, go on with the wedding; yet, he could not bring himself to humiliate Mary either, much less put her to death.

Breaking off the relationship, but not making a big deal of it, seemed to be the most honourable thing to do, and if Joseph's part in the Christmas pageant ended here, we could understand and respect him as a man of faith.

But there's more. According to Matthew, Joseph had a dream in which an angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him that the child in Mary's womb was of the Holy Spirit and that he should become as a father to the child.

Now, it would be tempting for us, reading the story some two thousand years after the fact – knowing the rest of the story, as it were – simply to say, "Well, there you have it." The angel explained everything.

But then, we have all had dreams, haven't we? And we know how bizarre and elusive dreams can be. I do not know many people who make major life decisions based upon what they think they saw or heard in a dream. Do you? Yet, according to Matthew, Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. The scripture says he took his wife to himself; and did not know her sexually until she had brought forth her firstborn son. (Matthew 1:25)

And then, in one further **act of faithfulness and obedience** to God, Joseph publicly named the child. Matthew says simply, "he named him Jesus." In so doing, he claimed the child as his own and gave him the benefit of a noble ancestry, making him a descendent of the house of David. Because of the faithfulness of Joseph, Jesus would have a father and Joseph would have a place in the drama of God's salvation.

To the world, the **Faithfulness** and **Quiet Strength** of Joseph may seem foolish, but to those who are willing to follow his example and surrender their wills to the will of God, the faithfulness of Joseph is not simply a way of pleasing God; it's a way of fulfilling your own life's destiny.

I don't know of a better way to model the faithfulness of Joseph than to start with the prayer of Adelaide Pollard who wrote:

"Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way; Thou art the potter, I am the clay; Mould me and make me after Thy will, While I'm waiting, yielded and still."

God bless you.

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