

St Joseph of Nazareth

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God our Father,
who from the family of your servant David
raised up Joseph the carpenter
to be the guardian of your incarnate Son
and husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary:
give us the grace to follow him
in faithful obedience to your commands.

Our text today may be found in Matthew chapter 1 and verse 19:

'Joseph, being a righteous man.'

On the edge of north London In St Martha's convent, Monken Hadley, on the window ledge of a back corridor is a small terracotta statue of St Joseph and the boy Jesus. The child is standing on tip-toe, his hands upstretched to embrace Joseph who is bending down over him to lightly kiss the top of his head. It is a beautiful statue encapsulating the paternal love Joseph felt for 'his son' Jesus and the love Jesus had for his 'father'.

There we have it – the problem Joseph faced – for the boy was not his, he was not Jesus' father but simply his foster father and so today on the fourth Sunday of Advent, I should like to consider the story of the annunciation to Joseph.

The details, I'm sure, are familiar. Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before they had had a chance to live together as man and wife, it was discovered that she was, according to Matthew's account, 'with child from the Holy Spirit'. Joseph was, as our text indicates, 'a righteous man.' Now righteous, in Greek δίκαιος ('dikaios'), in Hebrew 'tsaddiq', is a key concept in Judaism. It means a man who tries to live his life informed by the principles of the Law, the Torah. Joseph is essentially a just, God-fearing Jew who tries to do the right thing as far as he is able. Now the right thing to do is clearly to break off the engagement but he does not wish to put Mary to shame even if the child is definitely not his because they have not yet slept together. Having made up his mind what to do, Joseph can sleep but in a dream an angel of the Lord (unnamed here but I like to think it was again Gabriel) speaks to him, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.' And Joseph woke up and did as he was told and the rest is, as they say, history.

But before I stop, let's briefly consider the man. Joseph was of the House of David meaning he was of royal blood but he was no aristocrat but an ordinary working man who earned a living as a humble carpenter. There is very little known about him. References in the Bible are frustratingly scant and the apocryphal writings several centuries on are largely 'holy fiction'. This we do know:

- ✓ He married Mary.
- ✓ They travelled together to Bethlehem where Jesus was born.
- ✓ He had Jesus named and circumcised on the eighth day.

- ✓ On the fortieth day, he presented him as their first-born in the Temple.
- ✓ They fled to Egypt to avoid Herod's massacre of the innocents.
- ✓ They returned to Nazareth after Herod's death.
- ✓ They went annually to Jerusalem for Passover where Jesus, aged 12, went awol and was found, in the Temple about his father's business.
- ✓ He is mentioned as Jesus' father
- ✓ By the time of the Jesus' ministry Joseph has probably died – why else would Jesus entrust Mary to John's care ?

But the question I'd like you to reflect on is whether or not you think that Joseph ever had sexual intercourse with Mary. Now clearly he didn't before they were married because we know that Jesus is not his son. However, at the end of today's gospel from Matthew, we read: **'he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son and he named him Jesus.'** How you answer the question may be influenced by how you see the Virgin Mary. If you are Catholic, you may value Mary's virginity and wonder why a woman, who has given birth to the Son of God, would want to have children by an earthly father ? If you are Protestant, you may be more careless in the degree to which you view Mary as an example of godly chastity. The problem is compounded by the fact that Jesus had brothers and sisters. Later, In Mathew's gospel (13 v55, 56), we hear of his brothers James and Joseph, Simon and Judas and of his sisters without name or number. So the question is, were they Mary's by Joseph or Joseph's from a previous marriage ? Were Joseph an old man, as the apocryphal Protoevangelium of James suggests, then perhaps he might not have been interested in sex at that point in his life but the implication of the text in Matthew of **but had no marital**

relations with her until she had borne a son is to suggest they did after Jesus was born.

But whatever you think about whether Joseph ever slept with Mary or not, the most important thing about Joseph was that as a righteous man, he was prepared to do the will of God whatever the circumstances or personal cost to him. As such, Joseph is a role model for us as someone who loved Jesus as a father should his son.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

22nd December, 2013

G: Sermons 29 : Joseph

