

SPG#149, Advent 4A

December 23, 2007 – Fr. Charles Pope

Isaiah 7:10-16

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

There are many ways to approach the Holy Family in late Advent. In the scripture we can approach them through the Virgin Mary when Gabriel told her she was to be the mother of Jesus. We can approach them through the Baptizer, who announced the coming of Jesus. We can even go back and approach them through the prophecies in Isaiah that foretold the coming of the Messiah. We can approach them through the shepherds, the angels, and the magi. But today, via the gospel of Matthew, we approach the Holy Family through the earthly father of Jesus, Joseph.

As the gospel for today opens we find Joseph in a precarious position. He is engaged to Mary, and had never lived with her. But, as Matthew says, **She was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.** From the standpoint of the Judaism of that day, the implications are that she had either had sex with another man prior to her being engaged to Joseph, or she and Joseph had been intimate before marriage. And Matthew, in saying that she was with child from the Holy Spirit, is careful to point out that neither was the case.

But, in the Judaism of that day the possibility that she had been intimate with another man prior to her being engaged to Joseph meant that she was an outcast, disgraced.

So, as the gospel opens Joseph is faced with a dilemma. He loves this woman. But it appears that she is pregnant from another man.

Matthew says that Joseph is a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace. So he plans to “dismiss” her, or send her away where she is not known.

But just as he has decided to do this, he has a dream where an angel of the Lord speaks to him. The angel says, **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.**

The gospel writer then inserts that this dream took place to fulfill the prophecy that said, **The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”**

The climax of the story occurs after the dream as Joseph awoke from sleep, and as Mathew says, **did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had born a son; and he named him Jesus.**

The end of the story is climactic because of what Joseph could have done but did not.

Readers of this story are tempted to put words in Joseph’s mouth when the angel explains that Joseph should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, and that the child is conceived of the Holy Spirit and that Mary will bear a son whose name will be Jesus.

Perhaps readers expect Joseph to be a little more incredulous and have him say,

“Oh, I should go ahead and marry Mary. And that is OK because she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. And when she bears this son, we should name him Jesus. Well, that solves everything. Why didn’t you just say so?”

But in typical gospel style Joseph is quietly complicit, even in the face of an unconventional birth, even in the face of unanswered social questions.

And it is in his quiet complicity, his role as enabler and facilitator that he became a saint.

Biblical scholar Bruce Chilton says that Jesus would have been known as a “mamzer.”

A mamzer, Chilton says, was not a child born out of pre-marital relations. Rather, a mamzer was a child born of inappropriate sexual relations, such as incest. Jesus was circumcised, and so was seen as part of Judaism. But, as a mamzer, he would have been forbidden to enter the temple or synagogue. Chilton says that he would have struggled with this ostracism all his life. As long as Joseph lived, he could offer his son work, by training him as a carpenter. When Joseph died, Jesus' designation as a mamzer would have seemed even more ostracizing.

Chilton puts forth that Jesus' ideals about his relationship to the religious structure of the day, and his teaching about such, later were heavily influenced by his being a mamzer.

Wherever one comes down with Chilton's ideas, it is easy to see that the figure of Joseph is shrouded in concerns about questionable paternity, about questionable social status.

But in the face of all those concerns it was Joseph's presence that made him a saint. We could say, and it has been said, that Joseph is an icon of quiet and strong masculinity. And he is that. For what father among us would not want to be there for his family like he was? But I do not perceive that the example of his presence is confined to masculinity. Nor do I perceive that the gentleness of Mary is confined to the feminine.

Joseph stayed with the woman who was pregnant. In being faithful to his dream, he took Mary as his wife and named the child when he was born. Joseph, as the earthly father of Jesus, had a particular role to play in the birth and early life of Jesus. His was a role of facilitating the birth. His was a role of legalizing the birth. After Jesus was born, Joseph's role was that of teacher and father. Through it all his role was his presence.

All the figures of that time had a role to play in the Word becoming flesh. Mary, Elizabeth, John the Baptizer, the apostles, and others. They all had a role to play in the coming and mission of the Messiah. And thus, it has always been true that the followers of Jesus, before, during, and after his birth, all had specific roles to play. Those roles unfolded in the events and in the personalities of those figures. That is true for you and me as well. For each of us is called into a life, and born into a purpose. And we spend our lives discerning that call and that purpose.

But for today, hopefully we see our purpose more clearly because of the ministry of the presence of St. Joseph. In our lives, what is the value of someone who says they will always be there for us? What is the value of someone who gives their life to another as spouse or parent or caretaker? What is the value of a friend who is always there and will always be there? That is the value of presence. And Joseph is a human icon of that presence. But beyond humanity the gospel writer inserts, **Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”**

So there it is, the meaning behind the meaning. In our lives, on good days and bad days, when we are productive or not so productive, when we are loving or not so loving, when we are happy or angry God is with us. And he will always be with us. Always.

May the quiet eloquence of the presence of Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, teach us about our own presence, the presence of others, and the presence of God. Amen.