

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A

This is the last time we meet as a community before Christmas; the last opportunity for the Church, as a mother, to instruct our minds and hearts so that we may be attentive for the special grace offered us in this sacred season. So much attention is focused on Mary – and rightly so. Let us, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, spend a few moments meditating on the role played by Mary's husband, Joseph.

In Jesus' day a person was called by their personal name followed by that of their father and the place where they lived. Jesus was called 'Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth' (John 1:45; see also 6:42). Joseph was already dead by the time Jesus entered public life so he does not feature in the Gospel record except in the infancy narratives. Joseph's role, as we learn in today's Gospel, is to name the child, by which action he claims the child as legally his own. In this way, as the genealogy that opens Matthew's Gospel affirms, Jesus belongs through Joseph to the people who inherit the promises given to Abraham and to David.

Joseph is introduced to us in today's Gospel as 'a just man', that is to say, a man who is committed to doing the will of God. This is the characteristic most accented in the Gospel, which concludes with his being obedient to the message that came to him from God in a dream. His reaction to God's inspiration is the same in the scene where he is told to go to Egypt and again when he is told to return home. As soon as he knows God's will he immediately does it even though by doing so he is risking everything and going out into the unknown. Such is his complete trust in God. More than anything he wants what God wants. In this he is an example to us of the most basic and important response that we, too, are called to have towards God.

There is another, more subtle lesson for us in today's scene. Joseph would have known Mary well. Her innocence, her purity, her profound love for God, would have been radiantly obvious to anyone who was close to her, including, of course, the man who had sought and been given her hand in marriage. In describing Mary's pregnancy, Matthew wishes us to look beyond the physical and biological to the spiritual dimension of what is happening. Mary is portrayed here as a virgin. In other words her first love is for God and it is because of this love, because she has so welcomed and responded to God's embrace, that the child conceived in her womb is God's own especially loved Son.

As we look upon the scene painted here by Matthew we are meant to see Joseph lost in awe before the mystery and the beauty of what is happening in the womb of Mary. He cannot understand it but he knows it is of God. His reaction is to step back. What right has he to intrude here in this sacred place? It is obvious that God has a special loving design for Mary, but since God has not spoken to him, Joseph knows that he must not intrude. He decides humbly, and no doubt at great cost to himself, to withdraw quietly from the engagement. However, it is revealed to him in a dream, to his great joy, that he too has a role to play. He is to accept the child as his own and he is to go ahead and

take Mary as his wife. He is to love and nurture them both. Never has obedience to God been more joyfully given. Today's Gospel concludes with the statement that 'when Joseph awoke from sleep he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took Mary as his wife'(Matthew 1:24).

We can all learn from this wonderful man not to presume, not to trespass carelessly on sacred ground. How easily we take people for granted. This is perhaps especially true of those who are closest to us, like our spouse or our children. Joseph reminds us that there is a sacred mystery being enacted in the depths of the soul of every person. Love does not use or violate. Love does not presume or possess. We, like God himself in relation to Mary, must wait on the other person's 'Yes'. In the Book of Revelation Jesus says that he is standing at the door of our hearts knocking, waiting, hoping we will open to him so that he can come in and share an intimate moment with us. Joseph shows us what this means. Mary has accepted his offer and she has promised to be his wife, but he is sensitive to God's working in her and waits on God's word before presuming to take her as his wife. Such sensitivity, such awareness of the sacred, is a beautiful gift we could all pray for as Christmas approaches. Imagine the sacred awe with which Joseph looked upon the Christ child and gently took him into his arms. May we welcome the child Jesus with the same awe.

The Responsorial Psalm reminds us that if we wish to enter into the temple where God dwells (and we might think of the temple of each other's bodies, since it is God's desire to dwell in each one of us), we should have clean hands and a pure heart (Psalm 24:4). We are reminded of Jesus' words: 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God'(Matthew 5:8). If we learn to treat each other sacredly, mindful that we are called to be the temple of God, we will grow in the virtue of hope that we and those we love will at the close of our life enter fully into the ultimate temple of heaven where all is love. In the words of the Letter to the Hebrews: we are to take a firm grip of this hope. It is like an anchor of the soul. It is strong and will not slip, for it penetrates beyond the veil to where Jesus is in the embrace of God his Father (see Hebrews 6:19-20).

Paul, too, in today's Second Reading, gives as the main aim of his missionary activity. It is to bring about in people an obedience that is born of faith: a profound listening for God's inspiration, a listening born of love. Joseph is offered us as an example of this most attractive quality. Every single human being, every man woman or child in this church, is called to bear God's word within, and to carry Christ prayerfully and gently wherever we walk. Everyone is called to bring forth Christ into this world through our words and actions, and, of course, through the quality of our loving.

This is the grace of Christmas. That beautiful child that we once were is still well and truly alive in us, however hurt, however distracted, however injured by the sin of others or by our own sin. It is our humanity that binds us all together in one human family. Of course our humanity is very imperfect. Don't you think God knows that? It is this real human condition that God embraced in the Incarnation. Let us embrace each other's

mystery, and let us embrace our own. Only love can heal us and all God's love is available precisely for that. God loves us and nothing can separate us from that.

As we watch the baby Jesus held in the arms of his father, let us too embrace him. He will not refuse. Let us, like Joseph, respect this sacred place especially in our children, and by our reverence for them let us teach them what a sacred place they really are. As we reverence our children, we are reminded that we are all children, children of God, and so, mindful of our own ordinariness and imperfections, let us be gentle with each other, so that our love will awaken others to the intimate invitation offered each of us by God to be bearers of his Word. Each of us in our own way are encouraged by Mary to say Yes to Love, and by Joseph to kneel in awe as the mystery of our lives unfolds in all its simple wonder.