

[\[RCL\] Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80: 1-7, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25](#)

It is usual on this Sunday to think of Mary and her faithful response to God “Here I am!” We are all moved by her *Magnificat* – the song of her soul’s response to God’s call. But there is another character in this story who has a forgotten and misunderstood role – Joseph.

It’s easy to think of Joseph as nothing more than a bit character in the biblical storyline. Matthew, however, presents him as a main player in this story, portraying him as a just and righteous man walking a live of faith and obedience to God. “**The Walk of Faith Means Wrestling with Demons of Rage**” (*Russell D. Moore*)

From Pharoah to Herod the bible tells horrendous stories of the slaughter of innocents, and the Psalms speak of nations that are in tumult, raging against the Anointed One. The presence of Jesus brings about the kind of rage among those who are threatened by His Kingship. Throughout the whole of Scripture babies are the ones who get caught in the crossfire. It is always this way. Moses warns against the giving of infants to Molech, The Prophets speak out against those who come against the people with babies in their wombs (Hos 13:16). And then Herod seeks to murder innocents to protect his throne: scripture presents this as an act of horror.

John tells us in the book of Revelation that there is a great cosmic struggle that has been going on from the moment God said to the serpent that an offspring of Eve’s would crush his head. From that moment, John tells us, this dragon has been raging against the woman and her child. And isn’t it true that everywhere throughout Scripture and the history of the world there is present a hostility towards life and particularly towards children? This is because the serpent sees what many of us fail to see in the birth of children—blessing and life. The serpent sees in the birth of children the kind of dependent faith that Jesus says images the kingdom of God. Most of all, the serpent sees among “the least of these” the brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus. Today is no different. Children are still the victims of war and the lust for military and sexual power, and we face the same tumult of rage that Joseph faced.

There is a lovely little B &W film by an Italian Communist named Pier Paolo Pasolini, entitled *The Gospel according to Matthew*. There were no added words, just the text of the gospel. The opening of the film portrays the episode described in today’s gospel reading. For about 7 or 8 minutes not a word is spoken as we see a strong, wholesome young man walking towards a village. Standing in a doorway in the village is an obviously pregnant girl. We can see at once that the man is Joseph, the village is Nazareth and the girl is Mary. Joseph is striding along, carefree and happy until he catches sight of Mary. He stops transfixed in shock. This is girl he going to marry, this is girl his parents and her parents have chosen as a suitable wife. And she is pregnant. No words pass between them – only their eyes do the talking- communicating pain and disappointment and love. Joseph turns on his heel and just walks and walks and walks for miles until exhausted, he collapses and falls asleep. In his sleep the

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explanation is given in a dream. He wakes and slowly walks back to the village. Mary is waiting. Their eyes meet. And you know they both somehow know that nothing wrong or untoward has occurred but that somehow God has intervened.

Joseph goes on to accept his vocation – his role in the story of God with us. Quietly, without fuss, Joseph is open to believe the mystery of the virgin birth, and then he takes his essential part in the drama of Christ in his infancy and all that goes with it.

How old was Joseph? We don't know the answer for sure, but most writers agree that he was a young man and probably a teenager. If we said 17 years old, we would probably be about right.

Now Mary turns up pregnant. Joseph only knows one thing for sure. He's not the father. What words describe a teenager at a time like this?

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. You're a teenager in love and suddenly your girlfriend turns up pregnant. You aren't the father but you don't know who is. What do you do? Your response is probably a confusion of anger, frustration, embarrassment, shame, rage and disappointment.

Joseph on the other hand provides is a wonderful model of what a godly man looks like in these circumstances:

- He was tough when he could have been weak.
- He was tender when he could have been harsh.
- He was thoughtful when he could have been hasty.
- He was trusting when he could have doubted.
- He was temperate when he could have indulged himself.

There is one other line of proof about the kind of man Joseph was. When Jesus grew up and began his ministry, he chose one word above all others to describe what God is like. He called him Father. Where did Jesus learn about fathers? From Joseph. I speak again to the men. The way your children respond to God depends largely on the kind of father you are. You teach them something about God every day—just by the way you live in front of them.

Joseph represents all the quiet, unobtrusive, hardworking men and women who are as essential to the story of every family and enterprise as Joseph was to the story of the birth of Jesus. God notices that kind of person – *'my eyes are drawn to the man of humble and contrite heart'*. This is what catches the loving gaze and attention of God.

(Psalm 33, 35, 55 Isaiah 66)

St Augustine, wrote in one of his sermons:

Scripture testifies, the prophet and psalmist David was chosen according to the heart of God, and he fulfilled every wish of God. He shows us, my beloved brethren, God's love for his creatures in these words: "Who is like the Lord, our God, who is enthroned on high and looks upon the humble things of the heavens and the earth below?" (Ps 113:5-6). The Almighty Lord of infinite excellence and greatness esteems and appreciates humility in all His creatures, both in the highest and in the lowest of them—that is, in angels and men.

The practice of humility is beautiful; it is evidenced by these words of Solomon: "When pride comes, disgrace comes; but with humility there is wisdom" (Prov 11:2). Moreover, another sage says: "Humble yourself the more, the greater you are, and you will find grace with God" (Sir 3:18). And God says through the prophet: "My eyes are drawn to the man of humble and contrite spirit, who trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2).

And he concludes his sermon thus:

I still beg you to cultivate true humility within your heart; and to implant it in your neighbour, without using false pretensions. Edified by your good example, may they also give glory to God; together with you, may they receive the eternal reward in heaven, with the help and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

The drama of the gospel today is about that humble and just man, Joseph, and how his faith and trust in God helped him face a real moment of crisis in his life.

When we examine our own response to crisis we might find that we react defensively or aggressively out of self-concern. Other, like Joseph, are we able to see beyond themselves to the care of others? Certainly, crisis puts our faith to the test.

The ultimate mystery that surrounds us on every side and that we believers call **God** isn't something far off or distant. This mystery is with us and with each one of us. How can we know it? Is it possible to believe in a reasonable way that God is with me, if I don't have some personal experience, no matter how small? Ordinarily we Christians haven't been taught to perceive the presence of God's mystery within ourselves. That's why many imagine this mystery as off in some undefined and abstract place in the universe. Others seek this mystery adoring Christ present in the Eucharist. More than a few try to listen to this mystery in the Bible. For others, the best way is Jesus. How important is Jesus, really, for our personal life? Be honest. Ask the man-in-the-street what Christianity all about, and what's the usual answer?

Something to do with being a decent person, loving our neighbour, keeping the law; and perhaps going to church on a Sunday? Not many will directly mention of Jesus Christ, who is at the very centre of our faith. Ghandi once said, *If you Christians took your Christ to heart, the whole world would be Christian!*

Without doubt, God's mystery has a way to make itself present in all our lives. Perhaps we make things difficult for ourselves by looking outside of ourselves for something that is very close indeed *Emmanuel / God-with-us!* The secret consists, above all, in knowing how to just be, welcoming with a simple heart that mysterious presence that encourages and sustains us. It's not about trying to think about it, but just *welcoming* the peace, the life, the love, the forgiveness... that comes to us from the most intimate place within us.

When going deep within our own mystery, it's normal to meet up with our fears and worries, our wounds and sufferings, our mediocrity and our sin. We don't need to get upset by this, but to allow the loving presence that is at the most intimate depth of ourselves will go about calming us, freeing us, healing us.

Karl Rahner, a deep-thinking theologian of the 20th century, held that, in the midst of the secular society we live in, *this experience of the heart is the only one that can help us to understand the faith message of Christmas: God became man.* The final mystery of life is a mystery of goodness, of forgiveness and salvation, a mystery that is with us: within everyone and within each one of us. If we welcome it in silence, we will come to know the joy of Christmas. Joseph could only accept in faith what God's messenger told him, that the child was in Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. With great patience and humility, Joseph accepted the part for which God had chosen him, as human foster-father to the Saviour. This faithful acceptance is just what is required of each of us, when Christ comes into our lives, for he truly is *God-with-us.*

There must be evident in the people of God a demonstration of the same thing that Joseph is asked to do—to walk in the kind of faith that protects and provides, that nourishes and cherishes as does God. **The Walk of Faith Heralds a Kingdom's Dawn**

With thanks to:
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