

Along the track

Joseph I

Pope Francis has invited us to remember St Joseph throughout 2021, focusing on the theme of “With a Father’s Heart” So what has Joseph got to say to us today?

What do we know about him? Not much! But the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke wanted to tell us about him. We don’t know whether either of them knew him but he was obviously a figure deserving of great respect.

In my lifetime, Joseph has been encrusted with some pretty awful theology and some equally awful stories about how Joseph came to be chosen as the husband of Mary. He was often depicted as an old man often holding a lily. Some suggested he was married before and had children by his first wife and other rather bizarre theories. The old man holding the lily hardly portrays this man the authors of the Gospels write about – this man who spent his life as a tradie, this man who had the guts to go against the crowd in marrying this pregnant woman, the man who took his family on the dangerous journey into a foreign country, a refugee with the courage and perseverance that we witness even today.

According to The International Marian Institute: “We believe that Mary and Joseph were both in their teens when Jesus was born, around sixteen and eighteen respectively. This was the norm for Jewish newlyweds at that time.”

Conor Bellone, wrote in America magazine, April 2021: *I was shocked the first time I read this, but it has left an impression on me. Not only did it make more sense that Joseph was the age of most newlyweds of that time, but it humanized a character so ancient we hardly think of him as having a human age at all. When we think of Joseph as a young man, we realize he did not have the benefit of years of life experience to help him in his trials. He was certainly as scared and anxious as everyone is in their teens. When I see Joseph as a peer, it is easier to see his humanity as I can imagine him dealing with the ordinary concerns of coming of age while taking on his God-given duty to Mary and Jesus. Relationships, work, faith and love are the concerns of teenagers no matter what time period. But Joseph took on all of these with the weight of God’s mission on his shoulders. The saintliness of Joseph is that he managed to pull it off.*

We first meet Joseph when he is grappling with the shock that the young woman he loves is pregnant. In this time of turmoil and anguish, he has a dream.

It is easy to dismiss that as some pious story yet so many times throughout Scripture, God speaks to people in their dreams - in their visions, in their hopes, in what they imagine might be. The Hebrew scriptures have many such examples. This dream, however is a story of love, of courage, of dedication and commitment.

The General Directory for Catechesis includes this wisdom: *In a spirit of friendship God “reaches out to each person in the experience of day to day life using a pedagogy to reveal*

himself to the human person: God uses human events and words to communicate his plan; God does so progressively and in stages, so as to draw even closer to us...” (#38).

We all have dreams. They are part of who we are at every stage of life. If they are not, we need to ask ourselves what has killed the dreams within us. Our dreams give us a glimpse into our souls, into who we are and who we might be, they urge us on to greater things, to imagine what might be, what we might become, what we might create They are one of the ways God communicates to us.

Joseph’s dream is extraordinary and ordinary. He is a man close to God, he has a lively belief in God’s presence in his life. Is it any wonder that such a faith enables him to identify his own visions and dreams and those of God who lives within him and all around him, with God who is communicating his plan, who is inviting him into deeper friendship and commitment?

So Joseph is confronted with this situation – the woman he loves is pregnant. So he must put her aside, even risk having her stoned. So are all those hopes and dreams that they shared, the dreams they talked about, the plans they had for their life, are they going to come to nothing? Can you imagine the talks these two young people must have had together, their plans, their dreams for their life together – were they like the ones we had when we found the one we wanted to spend the rest of our lives with?

Joseph did not want to let his dream of life with Mary disappear. These dreams were too strong. They loved each other too much for that.

Ultimately, the life of Joseph of Nazareth was full of the unexpected and it demanded of him an openness and trust in the ways of God that would have been pushed to the limits. This dream was an invitation to enter into a new way of living, to a new trust in the God he loved. It was to be a way that was fraught with anxiety and confusion. Joseph offers a powerful example in his ability to be open to new, unexpected, and sometimes, unwanted experiences in life and to remain faithful to those he loved and to God.

We might not have the dreams of Matthew’s Gospel but we are called to hear the voice of the very same God who whispered in the ear of a carpenter. That voice is insistently inviting us to a new way of being and of doing, to dream of what might be. Sometimes, these dreams are wonderful and life-giving and sometimes they are full of pain and disquiet and confusion. This voice of God is asking of us an openness and trust like Joseph’s in the many experiences that confront, exhilarate and sometimes weigh us down.

Joseph of Nazareth still has a lot to say to us today.

Regards
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