

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent (A)

18<sup>th</sup> December 2022

‘Joseph & Mary: did what the angel told them to do’

Is 7: the maiden is with child ... Ps 23:

Rom 1: *Jesus Christ our Lord, ... in the order of the spirit, ... Son of God*

Mt 1:18–25: Joseph takes Mary to his home.

So, we now get to this latter part of Advent — “part II,” as I called it last week — when finally at Mass we hear of Mary & Joseph! The Christmas crib is up, the decorations are starting to appear, and we are truly getting ready for the great feast. The Church’s liturgy reminds us that we do that, best, in the company of **Our Lady and St Joseph**. We look to them — to how they prepared for that first Christmas — and we imitate them in their virtue. Mary & Joseph stand at their point in history as if representing all of Israel, from Abraham onwards. They are the figureheads of that long line of patriarchs, kings and prophets of the OT, ready and waiting for God’s command. Joseph, and perhaps Mary too, are of “the house and line of David”, and all of Israel’s 1800-yr history, as it were, is waiting on their word. God prepared His chosen people down through the centuries BC, till that moment *He knew* was the right moment for salvation. And

that’s where Mary & Joseph are — an engaged couple, there, at that moment, ready to hear the word of the Lord their ancestral God: ready to hear, ready to respond.

Today, in St Matthew’s Gospel, we hear mostly of Joseph: of his concerns when he finds that Mary is already expecting a baby, but how the message of an angel reassures him and urges him to take Mary to his home, accept and care for the child Jesus, be the head of the Holy Family with all the blessings and challenges that that will entail. Although Joseph features far less in the Gospels than does Mary, yet we see that his sacred role was a brave and crucial one in God’s plan. He was a most remarkable and sturdy saint, someone holy and wholly reliable, to whom God could entrust the sacred mission of His only Son, Jesus, and the protection of Mary. I love the way Matthew describes Joseph’s straightforward application of God’s message ... “*he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do.*” This echoes perfectly what Our Lady had said when the Angel Gabriel announced to her that she was to bear the Son of God: “*I am the handmaid of the Lord;*

*let what you have said be done to me.*” Mary and Joseph were attuned to God’s holy word; steeped in the Scriptures and the traditions of Israel, they were formed by God’s holy people to act in this new and courageous way when called upon to do so. For neither of them can it have been an easy thing to say ‘yes’ at this strange turn of events, to agree to something so out of the ordinary.

We so want to be with Our Lady and St Joseph in this final week of Advent. We want to accompany them all the way to Bethlehem, and to be very close to them as Jesus comes into the world. If we are close to these two great saints, then we know that we are close to Our Lord Himself. Each one of our families should want to imitate the Holy Family, having Jesus at its heart, and Joseph and Mary show us how to do that. Above all, it means having our life totally open to the will of God: not being so busy or so distracted that we fail to give time to prayer, allowing the prompting of the Spirit.

We want also to acknowledge that to be close to Jesus we need to have our hearts cleansed and made ready

— much as we might make fresh and ready the dwelling place for any new-born infant. The Gospel reminded us that Jesus’s name — the one given Him from heaven — means ‘God saves’: “*He is the one who is to save His people from their sins.*” So, do make sure that you avail yourself of the opportunity for Confession in the coming days, if you’ve not done so already this Advent. Ask Mary and Joseph in your prayers to help you come close to the saving heart of Jesus. Think how they knew Him from the first moment He was with them — unborn, and then new-born — the Son of God. They will help you realise that to approach Jesus in Confession is not a terrifying thing, but is born of an adoring love for this God who made Himself come among us as man, “*God with us.*”

And now: a little bit more, specifically, on **St Joseph**. The election of Pope Francis in 2013 brought renewed attention to St Joseph. The Pope’s inaugural Mass took place on St Joseph’s Day, 19<sup>th</sup> March, and he emphasised St Joseph’s role as protector: protector of Mary, of Jesus, ... of the Church. Then he agreed an initiative begun by Pope Benedict, to insert St Joseph’s name into every one of the Eucharistic Prayers. He

also issued a beautiful letter, *Patris Corde*, in December 2020, all about him: it's good to be reminded of the supreme importance of St Joseph.

Of course we know that the key to Our Lord's incarnation is Our Lady: Mary's acceptance of her role as mother of the divine Son. But all the same, she needed alongside her the extraordinary figure of Joseph, a robust and saintly husband. Unlike St Luke's infancy narrative which sees things from Mary's perspective, St Matthew's account of the Gospel is written from *Joseph's* perspective: we see his dilemmas over the baby that Mary carries, which is not his ... and yet, at God's word, mirroring Our Lady's own trust and faith, he takes her to his home: he accepts the child as if it were his own. Matthew portrays Joseph, then, as very human, but thoroughly faithful. Without his faith and courage, Mary would not have been protected at this, or any other stage through the dangerous events that surrounded the birth of Jesus. Many sinful forces were at work, jealousies that would have happily eliminated the Messiah in his infancy. It was Joseph who saw to it that the Holy Family was protected and saved.

[I was wondering the other day, would the child Jesus have called St Joseph, "father," even though he was only His legal

father and guardian? Yes, I imagine He would have done — this is what it meant for the Son of God to take flesh, and to be born into this world, and into a human family: to take on Himself all that is good and natural about human life, but without the admixture of sin ... Yes, I imagine that God Himself did honour St Joseph with that affection and title, "father."]

1. In the first instance, then, St Joseph appears as a **patron saint of, and example for, Christian husbands and fathers**. Before any concern of his own, he places the mother and child. In the sight of God, he fulfils that God-given vocation of husband. Tragically, a few years ago, our Parliament voted to sweep away the Christian (and, for that matter the Jewish and Muslim ... indeed the *simply human*) notion of marriage, i.e. between a man and a woman. But here, as a bolster to the truth, stands Joseph and Mary: the God-given unit of a couple, providing a home for the infant ... child ... adult ... God made man. It's so important for our society that husbands fulfil their great role of loving faithfulness to their wives; that as fathers they are attentive to the spiritual needs of their children. There is nothing more important in being a father than to make sure that your children are given a good example of loving God, of

praying, of coming to Mass, of worshipping Jesus as Lord. Just as Joseph did. A model husband and father, a model Christian man, and how dearly we need such a role model, to show that the Christian man is a real man! So often our faith is caricatured as some sort of a wimp's religion, a pathetic limping-on of an outdated tradition, as something not very manly. How very wrong! How wrong, when compared to the virile example of saintly heroism of St Joseph, or indeed many of the Church's saints down the ages: men of courage, strength and zeal, who carried the living Gospel with conviction in the face of incredible odds.

2. St Joseph is also the **patron saint of workers**, especially of craftsmen — he reminds us that our daily life and our work is an important dimension of life as God has given it to us. In that work of carpentry, we believe Jesus also would have been involved. We should learn from Joseph, then, to bring our faith to bear also on our daily working lives. Is anything we do or say at work — the way we behave, the way we speak, the way we treat others — at odds with our faith: immoral or unjust or sinful? Let's pray to St Joseph to help make our working environment a place which is sanctified, a place where our faith is not denied or hidden.

3. Finally, St Joseph is **patron saint of the dying**. Imagining him to have been accompanied at his death by Jesus and Mary, we invoke him as a saint powerful to protect us at our own deaths. As we come towards the end of another year, let's also ask this great saint, husband and protector to watch over us at our end, and keep us away from anything that would harm us or damage our faith, that we like Him may be close at our death to our Blessed Lord and His mother.

St Joseph! — pray for all our Christmases this week, and for those one day to be husbands and fathers, that their faith may be strong, and their example be always faithful to God's will. May this Sunday's Gospel give us that great reminder that the Catholic faith is a great calling, a work demanding commitment and real strength of character. May members of this Chaplaincy live up to the great and holy task, that of leading their families to the Lord.

*Holy Mary ... Blessed Joseph ... help us to see the Christ-child as you see Him, the saving action of God in our midst. Pray for us, that we may love Him as you love Him; help us to know His tenderness and compassion, that we may find forgiveness from Him.*