

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time year A 2007

Matthew 1:18-24

Oh dear Joseph, what you had to go through for the Incarnation...

We need really to look squarely at this happening.

We tend to gloss over it, because it is actually rather complex.

We tend to focus on the crib, so to “get to the heart of the matter”.

We can only really “get to the heart of the matter”, however,

if we accept to wrestle with the complexity.

So, let's wrestle!

Joseph is experiencing a bit of a dilemma – to say the least.

The wife is pregnant *before her time*:

not the thing to have happen in 1st century Judea.

Joseph and Mary were *betroted*, i.e. married but not yet living together,

at which time they would then have relations.

Such unchasteness was punishable by stoning (cf. Deuteronomy 22:22 and Leviticus 20:10).

What was going through Joseph's mind?

Is Joseph embarrassed and ashamed?

Is Joseph upset?

Is Joseph thinking

“I thought I had married church lady; yet lo and behold,

we're not even living together yet,

and here she is pregnant, and the kid's not even mine!”

Is this Joseph's thinking?

What is certain is that Joseph did not get what he had anticipated,

because he did not know what to anticipate!

Joseph *loved* Mary (who, by the way, was too deep to be church lady),

and the two of them were unreservedly given to God.

Joseph *knew* Mary, and she had surely made him aware of how given she was to God.

Our interpretation of what happens here must be founded on the presupposition of

- their trust
- their mutual knowledge
- their faith in God

Joseph is experiencing a bit of a dilemma, and so decides to divorce her.
Is he saying to himself,

“Well, I’m getting rid of this one.

I need a real woman, someone who is not too ‘religious’
and who can get her act together.”

Given our presupposition, probably not.

Often, we interpret Joseph wishing to divorce Mary
as an expression of his respect for the law.

Indeed, the commentary in the New American Bible says,
“As a devout observer of the Mosaic law, Joseph wished to break his union
with someone whom he suspected of gross violation of the law.”

And so, Joseph, being “a righteous man”, wants to respect the law,
and seeks to divorce Mary,
and, of course, wants to do it with a bit of class, instead of making a scene
(unlike I would be tempted to do, because I often like things to end with a bang!):
“Joseph decided to divorce her *quietly*”.

Actually, his public denouncement of her would have led to her being stoned.
A quiet divorce, which would have meant her return to her family,
where she probably would have been left alone,
was the most righteous thing to do – humanly speaking.

I propose, however, that we read this more deeply.

It was surely not a cake walk for Joseph.

It is safe to presume that Joseph opted to go beyond

- what he may have initially felt
- what his emotions may have initially prompted him to think

and to

- gaze upon Mary with eyes of faith
- act according to the trust to which faith leads
- welcome God’s will

But did Joseph go beyond feeling and initial thought
only to the level of noble respect of the Law?

Can we not perhaps say that Joseph decided to divorce Mary quietly not because he thought to himself

“The Law comes first and I must respect its ordinances, and, because I do love Mary, this is the most honorable way to make this whole thing go away.”
but because he did not want to interfere with the work of the Holy Spirit in Mary?

Recall that

- the announcement to Mary does not include Joseph, which is odd because God normally respects human bonds and thus would/should have included Joseph
- Mary did not inform Joseph

Does not all of this, in fact, express the great trust

- of God in Joseph
- between Mary and Joseph

Joseph wanted to give Mary to the One to whom she belongs. Contrary to what the cultural tendency may have been at the time, Joseph knows in his heart that his love for Mary does not give him ownership rights over her.

The angel, however, tells him to proceed otherwise. He is to trust, and to take Mary his wife into his home. He is to shelter her from any “social awkwardness” that comes from this “early pregnancy”. He was surely overwhelmed, and knew that he could only lean on God. But gradually, he would discover that when we give a loved one to God, God gives us the loved one more intimately than before.

This is what makes Joseph the strong silent type – *without falling into caricature.*

- His strength is that which comes from love.
- His silence is that which comes from love.

And he is more than a model. He is a *friend* to us. He is *present* to us.

And he would like to help us to “take Mary into our home”.

The angel says to us, “Do not be afraid to take Mary into your home”, i.e. your heart. because we are often hesitant with respect to Mary or we simply ignore Mary, we think of her as object of devotion for the older women in the parish. **WRONG!!!!**

She is so much more, so much more subtle, so much stronger and deeper.

Joseph will help us to discover her.

The angel will help us to discover her.

The Holy Spirit will help us to discover her.

And she wants to help us to discover the Incarnate Word, Jesus, more intimately than we can imagine...