

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 1:18-24

This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, and said ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.’ Now all this took place to fulfil the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, a name which means ‘God-is-with-us’. When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home.

The Gospel of the Lord.

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

In this fourth and final Sunday of Advent, the Gospel guides us towards Christmas through the experience of Saint Joseph, a figure seemingly in second place, but whose attitude encapsulates all Christian wisdom. He, together with John the Baptist and Mary, is one of the characters whom the liturgy proposes to us for the time of Advent; and of the three he is the most modest. He is one who does not preach, does not speak, but tries to do God’s will; and he does it in the style of the Gospel and the Beatitudes. Let us think of: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. And Joseph is poor because he lives on what is essential, he works, he lives by his work; it is the poverty typical of those who are aware that they depend on God for everything, and place all their trust in Him.

Today’s Gospel passage presents a situation that is in human terms embarrassing and conflicting. Joseph

and Mary are betrothed; they do not yet live together, but she is expecting a child by the work of God. Joseph, faced with this surprise, is naturally disturbed but, instead of reacting in an impulsive and punitive manner – as was the custom, the law protected him – he seeks a solution that respects the dignity and integrity of his beloved Mary. The Gospel says so: “And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly”. Joseph knew that if he denounced his betrothed, he would expose her to serious consequences, even death. He had full faith in Mary, whom he chose as his bride. He does not understand, but he seeks another solution.

This inexplicable circumstance leads him to question their bond; therefore, with great suffering, he decides to detach himself from Mary without creating scandal. But the Angel of the Lord intervenes to tell him that the solution he proposes is not the one desired by God. On the contrary, the Lord opened a new path for him, a path of union, love and happiness, and said to him: “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife. For that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit”.

At this point, Joseph trusts God totally, obeys the Angel’s words and takes Mary with him. It was precisely this unshakable trust in God that enabled him to accept a humanly difficult and, in a certain sense, incomprehensible situation. Joseph understands, in faith, that the child born in Mary’s womb is not his child, but the Son of God, and he, Joseph, will be its guardian, fully assuming its earthly paternity. The example of this gentle and wise man exhorts us to lift up our gaze and push it further. It is a question of recovering the surprising logic of God which, far from small or great calculations, is made up of openness towards new horizons, towards Christ and His Word.

May the Virgin Mary and her chaste husband Joseph help us to listen to Jesus Who comes, and Who asks to be welcomed in our plans and in our choices.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What doubts and fears do you struggle with in believing and understanding God’s work and presence in your life?
- When and how have you felt God draw beside you to guide or change your mind about a decision? How did you recognise that it was God’s voice and direction?
- How do you feel about the idea of God desiring ‘to be with you’ to ‘walk with you’ personally and guide you in every moment of the day?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. “Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray”)
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others’ prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the ‘Glory Be’ or similar prayer.