

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT: DECEMBER 18, 2022

Do you pay attention to your dreams? What do they say to you? This past week one of our brothers shared a dream he had the previous night. In this dream, Donald Trump was chasing him and he was trying to hide from him! I dream some nights but the dreams usually don't make much sense to me. I suppose people of an earlier pre-scientific age were more sensitive to images, signs and stories. We find people in the Bible who have special dreams and there are sages who help to interpret them. Today we hear of a significant dream in the gospel.

In the coming weeks of Christmas it is the figure of Mother Mary whose faith and courage we especially applaud. She shows remarkable strength and trust in God. On Christmas and the feast of her motherhood, celebrated on new year's day, we shall hear more of her maternal and feminine carrying out of God's plan. Luke's gospel in particular stresses Mary's role. But we are now reading the gospel of Matthew this year. We notice in the first two chapters of his gospel, which are called "The Infancy Narratives" that the author pays a lot of attention to Mary's husband, Joseph.

Joseph is an ordinary but extraordinary man. He never speaks one word that is quoted in the gospels. But he is a keen listener to God's voice and, once he hears it, he decisively acts. The gospel simply calls him a just man. He has good reasons to fear, to be angry, to be hurt, but he is a bigger man than one acting in such ways. He accepts his difficult role and responsibility by naming the child, as a father would be expected to, and so gives legitimacy to the child and his mother.

There is a movie version of the Christmas story which depicts Joseph as a handsome, young man. This makes sense to me as he and Mary were already engaged to be married. Joseph and Mary must have loved each other. Joseph's faith, as well as his whole world, was really tried when he learned that Mary was pregnant. He is an ordinary man, some kind of tradesman by profession. He is strong, decisive, and probably younger and more virile than we have pictured him in our pious concerns to protect Mary's virginity.

Then he is visited in some form of a dream. Matthew then calls him a just or righteous man. This implies that he is fully faithful to his religious tradition, the Law of God. But he is able to adjust when facing the Mystery of God breaking into

his life. What does one do when God breaks in new, previously unimaginable ways? How does one deal with an impossible conception? In essence what Joseph teaches us is how to live in loving fidelity to all that we cling to humanly and religiously even as we are open to a mystery of God that takes us beyond all the categories of our religious practice and imagination.

There are some gnostic gospels that depict the child Jesus performing miracles and showing his divinity. Our gospels do not suggest that at all. Though we don't know the details we can picture Joseph as the teacher of the boy, Jesus. He teaches him how to act with Mary and with women. He teaches him how to use his hands and his head. He loves the boy and shows him gentleness and strength and probably corrects him at times too. And, always, he is in love with Mary.

I read once in some survey that the religious life of children as they grow is largely shaped and dependent on the example of the father or some significant male adult. The children look to him to see how to live as adults. This is especially true for boys who want to emulate strength, though girls also find their security and strength in a strong, loving father.

And what does this say about today's world and culture? So many men don't know their place in society anymore. And many young men, if they have a father at all, are struggling with suicide, addiction and sexual identity. They need a Joseph in their lives, an example of loving manliness. And I suspect that most women welcome a Joseph in their lives as well.

"When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took his wife into his home." May I suggest you join me in reflecting a bit, this Christmas, on this just man and be resolved to follow his example. Just like Joseph, I need to listen, to act, and to love, even when all this requires great sacrifice of me.

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