

Allen Hall Public Lecture 3 Saint Joseph.

Matthew

We first met St. Joseph in the Scriptures at the beginning of Matthew's gospel.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; ¹⁹ and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly. (Matthew 1:18:19)

Betrothal was taken very seriously and had legal consequences. It took place at the home of the father of the bride. It was much more binding than engagement in modern society. The husband to be presented his intended (and her father) with the marriage contract and the bride price. Several years may have elapsed between this and the actual marriage ceremony which consisted in the bride moving from her father's to her husband's house.

Mary's pregnancy seems to be the case outlined in Deut. 22:23-27 which involves a betrothed virgin who is found to have had sexual relations. The penalty in such a case is death, although it is uncertain that this would have been rigidly applied. At least it would have involved great shame for Mary and her family, indeed the end of any good marriage prospects for her. Joseph is characterised as 'just' or 'righteous', *dikaios*. This is best explained as a technical term for one who assiduously keeps the law, but we see already a hint that true righteousness is understanding the spirit rather than the letter of the law. He combines both righteousness and mercy. The other option open to Joseph is the simple writ of divorce signed by two witnesses and allowed by the Mosaic Law. No more questions would be asked.

Betrothal is not engagement as we understand it now, it was in effect marriage. Typically, girls would be betrothed as early as 14. This was a ceremony in which bride and groom exchanged consent in the presence of witnesses and they were considered to be legally married and only a writ of divorce could break that bond. The groom would then build a house, or complete the house he was building and then take his wife home with him and the marriage could be consummated. In Catholic canon law for a marriage to be valid and binding it has to be

ratum et consumatum. The *ratum* means that they couple have to have exchanged vows and consent in the presence of witnesses (usually a priest or deacon and two others, witnesses, at a marriage ceremony however simple or minimal) we would say ‘ratified’ in English, and the *consumatum* is obvious. So at this stage the marriage of the holy couple is *ratum* but not *consumatum*.

Joseph’s agonising is cut short by an angel, The announcement of Jesus’ birth and name is the centre of this passage and it follows a well-established O.T. pattern: The announcement of the birth with the word ‘behold’ *hinneh*, The designation of the child’s name and which is also an indication of his identity. This applies to Ishmael (Gen. 16:11-12), Isaac (Gen. 17:19), Solomon (1Chr. 22:9-10), Josiah (1Kgs. 13:2) and Immanuel, the prince born to the virgin at Ahaz’s court (Isa. 7:14-17). Although Joseph is righteous, his righteousness, i.e. assiduously keeping the law, is not enough to help him handle this situation in the correct way. It requires the direct intervention of God to put him on the right track. The angel addresses him as *Joseph, son of David*, i.e. one who has some of David’s qualities, in this case that God intervenes directly in his life and he co-operates.

People tend to assume that Joseph doesn’t want Mary as his wife because it looks as though she’s been misbehaving. But some of the fathers thought that it was because Joseph realised Mary was with child through the Holy Spirit and therefore felt completely out of his depth and like so many in the OT his first reaction to the presence of the divine was fear and so felt totally unworthy to be Mary’s husband

Luke

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:4-7)

It's strange first of all that Joseph should bring his pregnant wife on this arduous journey, but maybe he wanted to protect her from over-zealous neighbours at home. The traditional idea, portrayed in nativity plays of the Holy Couple looking for a hotel room for the night and being chased away by heartless innkeepers is of course fanciful. The word translated as 'inn' in most English translations is *kataluma*. Which is probably better translated as 'guest room.' In the parable of the good Samaritan the Samaritan takes the unfortunate traveller to an inn. Here the word is, different *pandocheion*, literally 'a place for receiving everyone' That is clearly what we mean by an inn or hotel today. The KJV puts it *because there was no room for them in the inn*. But the word 'room' translates the Greek *topos* which more correctly means 'space'.

So it's not that all the rooms in all the hotels in Bethlehem were full that night. Probably they had gone up some time in advance, but the guest room in the family home was already full. The image we have of Mary and Joseph going around Bethlehem knocking on doors and being told firmly and politely that there were no vacancies doesn't really hold water and owes more to the imagination of people who write nativity plays than those who wrote the gospels.

In Luke 22:10-12 Jesus gives instructions to the disciples to prepare for the Passover and tells how the disciples will be shown the upper room. The word used here is the same *kataluma*, the guest room of a private house. So in Bethlehem other relatives were no doubt already there. Giving birth to a child in a room which is already crowded with lots of men milling around would be a real no no for devout Jews in a culture which carefully protected the modesty of women. There is no mention of a stable, because in a poor house at that time, at night the animals would be brought inside – to provide warmth and for their safety, so Jesus would have been laid in the feeding trough or the hole in the ground which was within the family home.

The eastern tradition has the birth taking place in a cave. All icons depict the Nativity scene in this way. This is also perfectly possible, many people then did live in caves, or they use the cave as the start of a home but built on to it.

The birth of Jesus begins with an imperial decree. This would have been written in terse official language, a census which would be very unpopular. Something which would be on the record for years to

come, provable. But God's action begins with a song. Luke wants to make the contrast between a decree and a song, sung once, the words recorded but not the music. Maybe we could accuse the shepherds of dreaming, maybe they imagined it, and maybe they were drunk. Yet what happens to them is far more real and has far more lasting effect than the census. People might accuse us of dreaming and yet we know our faith makes such a difference.

Reflections

You don't meet as many of them now, but there used to be lots of men around in our parishes who were like St. Joseph. Often Irish men, men who worked with their hands... They are the kind of men who were totally reliable, totally loyal to the church. You'd never find them at a discussion group but always at Mass, often rosary in hand. If you wanted something practical doing it was always Paddy or Mick you turned to. They always had a profound respect for the priest. They often said very little, at least in public, the wife did all the talking and apart from in their own homes and maybe in the pub they were often quite shy. Good, upright, solid quiet men. Holy men. Men who because they said so little and kept so much in the background you might be inclined to think weren't important. But they were real men and true fathers.

That's exactly how I see St. Joseph.

What we see of Joseph in the NT is no doubt just the tip of a very deep, very reflective, very prayerful iceberg.

We know that the little we glean from the scriptures is just a hint of much more; a very holy very upright man.

That's the first thing he has in common with us. With every priest and every seminarian there is much more going on that what's seen on the surface, what's seen in public.

Usually that Iceberg metaphor is a negative one meaning there is lots of negative stuff hidden under the gleaming white peak.

I don't mean that, but I do mean that although we learn to live very public lives, that public life is impossible without a more hidden life. We can't preach and teach and lead and be credible witnesses to the gospel unless there is prayer, reading, quiet devotion. Sadly we have become all too familiar with the image of someone who has one life in public and a completely different one in private. That's disastrous. But

we are all called to have a hidden life, a life which feeds and sustains our public life and St. Joseph can be a great example here.

In Colossians Paul says: *you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.* (Col 3:3)

It means at least for me that the thing that really makes us tick Christ and our relationship with him – is not something we can easily share with or explain to everyone. Obviously as Christians we are duty bound to try and do that, but to paraphrase Tony Blair, some people just don't do God.

If someone lives for Arsenal football club it's clear to everyone what he's about.

When we live for Christ, even if we indicate that publicly by the way we dress, it's meaning remains hidden, unavailable to many people.

Just look at how those commenting on the election of a pope understand the whole thing in terms of politics and power struggles within the Vatican and use the word "Policy" when they are talking about "church teaching"

I wonder if anyone in Nazareth or Bethlehem really understood what was the centre of Joseph's life? His real life was hidden. So is ours sometimes, although there are, thank heaven, people – in all walks of life who share the same hidden life and so can understand us.

Much of what Joseph had to do was protect the holy family. Protect Mary from gossip mongers, protect Jesus from Herod's soldiers. That too was something that went on largely hidden.

It's not a very fashionable thing to say, but part of what we do as priests is protect. Protect the faith from defective teaching of it. We protect the liturgy from being trivialised by some and protect it from others turning it into an esoteric club.

Sometimes we have to use our judgement to protect the faithful, although they probably would be offended if you thought they needed protection.

When I was a deacon in Wembley I wouldn't let some people put up a poster about some apparitions of Our Lady which had not received official approval anywhere, because I felt I had to protect the parishioners from it. Now and then I've received literature and requests from people asking me to use my position to promote various purported

private revelations. I never do, part of my job as a priest is to protect people from spurious claims.

One of the things that makes me livid is when a priest doesn't protect the things he is charged to protect, and allows the spiritual treasures of the Church to be squandered or to fall into disuse.

The seminary too is a place of protection. It's not something you would not say too loud. A lot of what is going in here is almost the opposite of protection. It's helping the seminarians to be confident in public, to be able to represent Christ publicly, to be strong enough to do this without someone holding their hand or patting them on the back every five minutes.

But we all need protection. Especially in its early stages a vocation needs protecting from a life that might become too wild, it needs the protection of an environment where people are of like mind, we need the protection of a place where we are not constantly having to justify and defend ourselves. There is a similar understanding concerning married people in Deuteronomy 24:5

“When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be charged with any business; he shall be free at home one year, to be happy with his wife whom he has taken.

Here again the notion that a marriage in its early stages needs protection and nurturing. This protection is precisely what St. Joseph provided for Jesus and Mary.

In early 70's the Dutch church closed all its diocesan seminaries and anyone who wanted to be a priest just had to go and do a theology degree at a catholic university and then present himself to a bishop. It seemed like a brave experiment but of course it was a total failure, partly because people's vocations had absolutely no protection. St Joseph again models exactly the sort of care we need.

The Dutch have a very useful word *Geborgenheid* – it means “hidden-ness” and they use it quite a lot. Every human being needs a degree of hidden-ness, needs somewhere they can be away from public scrutiny and alone with God or just with themselves. That was a feature of Joseph's life. Let's ask him to have the right degree of hidden-ness.

In my home parish in Liverpool for 40 years our parish was Fr. James Hopkins. A small man, but a giant character. A huge voice, a real wit, an extrovert, someone you would always notice in a room,

once met never forgotten, most loved him, some hated him, no one could be indifferent to him.

In 1981 he was succeeded by Fr. Michael Reilly – you couldn't have two more different men. Fr. Reilly was shy, quiet. If you listened to his sermons they were excellent, but he usually delivered them in a flat monotonous voice. He seemed in so many ways the opposite of Fr. Hopkins.

But what I came to really appreciate was his quiet constancy. For 23 years he served the parish, was always totally reliable, always there always truly available. In those 23 years my life took me to Asia and Africa and Rome, through one very major crisis and a couple of minor ones and the death of both my parents. And all that time there was Fr. Reilly, a still point in my turning world, quietly being an exemplary priest. You'd see him every day in church walking up and down saying his rosary, often in a rather worn anorak. Slowly I came to realise what a wonderful example of priesthood he was, quiet, constant, absolutely faithful and it wasn't until he died I realised how much I'd come to love him and what an inspiration and example he was for me. When he arrived in the parish the word inspiration was the last word I would have used about him. But that's what he was, not through anything spectacular, but through his quiet, unremarkable constancy.

I came to realise that he was a real St. Joseph figure and I thank God for him and all the quiet good men like him. Let's realise that we have so much to learn, and so much to gain from the example and protection of Joseph, the quiet, constant faithful man of God.

St. Joseph is silent in the scriptures. Whatever we learn from him we learn from the silent example of what he did. I've had lots of good advice and counsel from priests about being a priest. I've learned a lot from what they've told me over the years. But if I look deep into my heart my sense, my feeling of what being a priest is comes from a few priests in my home parish and one in the next, and it was not what they said, just what they were and how they went about their daily work. So Joseph doesn't have to say anything to be an example for us. Four times Joseph listens to a dream.

Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; ²¹ she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel” (which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. (Matthew 1:19-24)

Then after the visit of the wise men we read:

an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod (2:13-15)

After the death of Herod we read:

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, ²⁰ “Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” ²¹ And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. (2:19-21)

And then he has a fourth dream many of us had probably never noticed:

Mt. 2:22 But when he heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.

Dreams are not direct clear messages, they are often hard to understand and easy to dismiss. But Joseph has a sensitivity and a subtlety that enables him to hear the voice of God, even when it whispers gently in the middle of the night. Our own ability to do the will of God will often depend on how willing we are to do the same, to follow the gentle promptings of God’s spirit. Having worked many years in seminary formation, and reflecting on how I perceived and discerned my own vocation to the priesthood, it’s very rare that someone has a blinding

revelation telling them to be a priest. It's usually that still small voice, sometimes barely perceptible. Sometimes people resist it for years, but slowly when a man listens to the gentle hints and movements of the heart he discerns that call – though never without the help of others.

Please note that although Joseph is silent, he doesn't fade into oblivion; he becomes part of the gospel. Those priests who silently, unknowingly inspired me in my teens are all dead. But they will always be for me part of the good news.

When we live for Christ, even if we indicate that publicly by the way we dress, its meaning remains hidden, unavailable to many people.

St. Joseph the Worker.

This feast has an interesting history, although it didn't exist before 1955. First of all) S Joseph's Feast on March 19 got under way in the 15th century and gradually spread. It celebrated S Joseph, Spouse of the *Theotokos*.

I'm not quite sure why but in 1847 Pope Pius IX introduced a second feast of St. Joseph, in addition to that on March 19th called the "Patronage of St. Joseph." Also called Guardian of the Universal Church My guess is that a) there was at the time an increasing devotion to St. Joseph and b) that March 19th always falls in lent and so there was a desire to be able to celebrate the Saint more exuberantly in a non-penitential time. Originally it was celebrated on the 3rd Sunday of Easter. (Called the second Sunday in the Extraordinary form calendar.)

In 1911 the feast was renamed the Solemnity of St. Joseph and in 1913 the celebration was moved to the Wednesday after the second Sunday after Easter. And I guess none of us have ever witnessed it, maybe never even heard of it.

The feast was suppressed in 1956 to be replaced by the feast of St. Joseph the Worker at the behest of Pius XII. This was in many ways his response to the growing 'labour' movements throughout the world. By the mid-20th century many countries, especially those with socialist or communist governments had started to celebrate May 1st as International Workers' Day. This became a focal point for demonstrations by various socialist, communist and anarchist groups. May Day is one of the most important holidays in communist countries such as North Korea, Cuba and the former Soviet Union countries. May

Day celebrations in these countries typically feature elaborate workforce parades, including displays of military hardware and soldiers. These May Day celebrations were not going to go away, they captured the imaginations of tens of millions of people, so Pius XII though basically “If you can’t beat them, join them”. Well, not quite as simple as that.

All these groups and regimes in various ways claimed to empower and liberate the workers whereas in fact their bitter history shows that the opposite happened in instead of being the slaves of capitalist bosses, people became the slaves of governments. People were just expendable cogs in a vast, faceless, economic machine. The vision of human beings created in the image and likeness of God was completely lost. Of course, there were advantages and benefits to the labour movement, but it was driven by socialism and communism and could rarely if ever inspire or enable men to fulfil the true dignity of their labour.

Pius saw in St Joseph an antidote to all that. Here was an honest man who worked with his hands, who was in that sense a model for Christian workers everywhere. He was the luminous counterpart of all those so called labour movements which in fact turned men (and increasingly women in communist countries) into tools for the state’s production machine.

We might reflect how secular virtues, which are virtues all have their luminous counterparts in Christian virtues. So the secular virtue of optimism is a very useful thing. It can stop people falling into panic and despair. It says basically: “cheer up, it’ll probably never happen, look on the bright side, every cloud has a silver lining etc.” Optimism helped our parents and grandparents get through two world wars. Fine, except sometimes the worst does happen and we can’t just cheer ourselves up and make the bad things go away. Its luminous Christian counterpart is hope. Hope is more realistic. It say “Things are probably going to get worse than you ever imagined, but fear not, God has a plan up his sleeve and even when it seems that everything is lost or destroyed God can bring new life. The way the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel dealt with the disaster of the Babylonian exile exemplifies this. In 587 BC Jerusalem was utterly destroyed and many of its people carried off into exile in Babylon. It was the worst disaster that had ever

befallen the nation. The false prophets were saying to people: “cheer up, don’t worry, you’ll be back home before you know it.” Jeremiah on the other hand wrote to the exiles and told them they were probably going to be there for decades, so don’t build up any false hopes. But eventually God will rescue you and your return will be more glorious than ever. The false prophets had the secular virtue of optimism (which in this instance was just plain wrong and misleading.) Jeremiah had the holy virtue of hope.

In a similar way. the Church’s instinct here in creating the feast of St. Joseph the worker was a very sound one. Often the early Church looked at things in the pagan world and as it were baptised them, transformed them. So for instance in Rome there is a magnificent Church dedicated to Our Lady called Santa Maria Sopra Minerva – Saint Mary above Minerva or above the temple of Minerva. People had venerated the false pagan goddess there for centuries. When Rome was Christianised, instead of completely obliterating all memory of the place, the Church said: “let’s take this goddess worship which is bad for people because it’s false, and turn it into something Holy and good, the veneration of Our Blessed Lady. This was not just crude syncretism, but a way of directing people’s often wayward aspirations in the right direction.

So, Mid 20th century we have May day celebrations in many countries, which yes, celebrate the workers, but these celebrations are organised by governments which in many cases dehumanise people. Enter St. Joseph an artisan, someone who we assume worked hard, passed on his skill to Jesus and was fulfilled by his labours. So he had his work. For a man that’s fundamental to his dignity, to his sense of self-worth. But he also had something, someone, much bigger – Jesus himself.

And isn’t St. Joseph, in his working life, a great example to all men. We find a degree of legitimate fulfilment in our work, whatever it is, but that will never be complete without at least one eye on Jesus.