

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday Advent Year “A”

“Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid.”

December 21-22, 2013

Readings: Isaiah 7: 10-14; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24

On several occasions, those who hail from Minneapolis have told me that they can tell that I am from Saint Paul because I always ask the same questions. Who are your parents? Where did you go to high school? What street do you live on? While these seem like innocent enough questions to me, apparently they betray a homey, small town attitude unbecoming of our larger Twin to the west.

We in the capitol city are in good company, because in ancient Israel, identity by family name, town and ancestry was critically important. Despite his humble work and means, Joseph came from a royal lineage. Sts. Luke and Matthew diverge with respect to some details of Joseph's genealogy—for example the name of Joseph's father— but they both mark his descent from David, the greatest king of Israel.<sup>1</sup> As Pope Benedict reminded us, “Neither evangelist is concerned as much with names as the symbolic structure within which Jesus' place in history is set before us.”<sup>2</sup>

And both genealogies establish the legitimate fatherhood of St. Joseph. In Jewish practice, adoptive fatherhood was no less valid than biological fatherhood. St. Matthew presents Joseph as the legal father who validly transmits Davidic descent without being the biological father. Joseph's fatherhood is much more than adoptive, however, since he was already betrothed to Mary in a juridically binding manner at the time of the Jesus' Conception. By taking Mary into his home before Jesus' birth, Joseph was merely continuing with the final phase of Jewish marriage, begun already with their betrothal.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Matthew 1:1-16 and Luke 3:23-38

<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, p. 8

Indeed for the Jews, the questions ‘Who are you?’ and ‘From where did you come?’ were not insignificant ones. The earliest theologians had no doubt: our Lord is “of the seed of David by the birth He has from Mary.”

God directed Joseph’s decision to accept his betrothed and to take her into his home as his wife through the message of an angel. Just as this scene must have completely caught Joseph off guard, and as he must have struggled with what to do, this account has puzzled commentators for centuries as well.

What was going through Joseph’s mind?

Some of the Fathers of the Church believed that Joseph had suspected Mary of adultery. Others surmised he had withheld moral judgment, being genuinely perplexed by the strange situation, while still others think the exact opposite. In his Commentary on St. Matthew’s gospel, St. Thomas Aquinas was convinced that St. Joseph understood the miraculous nature of Mary’s pregnancy, not at all doubting her virtue:

It was easier for him to believe that this had been fulfilled in her than that she had committed a sin. And so, regarding himself as unworthy to live under the same roof with someone of such sanctity, he wanted to put her away privately, as Peter said, “*Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man*’ (Lk 5:8)<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps it was a mixture of conflicting thoughts that occupied his mind in that moment. Whatever the reason or reasons, of this much we are certain. St. Joseph had an indispensable role in the divine drama of Christmas, and he made necessary sacrifices in his life in order to follow unreservedly the will of God.

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<sup>3</sup> (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura super Matthaëum*, cap. I, lect. 4. See *Cradle of Redeeming Love*, by John Saward, Ignatius Press, 2002 p. 205).

May all fathers see in Saint Joseph a model worthy of emulation and strive to exercise his loving leadership. All the pieces are now in place, and in some respects, St. Joseph is the last.

Both Mary and Joseph are deeply troubled and the angel tells both of them: "*Do not be afraid*". Both have found favor with God because He chose them from among all people in the world for this moment and for their mission. Joseph, like Mary, submitted his will to God and he responded with his own fiat.

In these last days of Advent, let us be more like Joseph by imitating his humility and by our submission to and acceptance of God's most holy will. In doing so we will have true peace and joy. As the Nativity of Our Lord approaches, St. Joseph asks us to be simple and humble in our contemplation of Mary and Christ.