

Throughout Advent, we have been focusing as a parish on deepening our prayer life. One of the ways of prayer that we considered is called “Lectio Divina,” or *divine reading*. In this form of prayer, you seek to put yourself in the Scripture using your imagination: what do you see, what do you hear, what stands out to you? This way of prayer is particularly powerful when we consider the Christmas narratives in Matthew and Luke’s Gospel.

I’d like for us to engage our Gospel from Matthew tonight using this form of prayer for meditation, focusing specifically on St. Joseph. Now immediately this may seem a little odd, because Scripture does not record a single word spoken by St. Joseph. And yet, there is so much we can learn from him, even in his silence. First of all, his *disappointment*. Now I realize that Christmas is supposed to be the most joyful day, but let’s be realistic; sometimes the holidays can be very hard. I imagine for most of us, there is at least some sorrow mixed in with the joy of our celebrations, as the holidays can make us even more aware of those things in our lives that are not as we would like them to be.

Now, I could have read the entire genealogy of Jesus for our Gospel tonight, but for fear of getting lost in all of the names, I used the short form. The genealogy in St. Matthew’s Gospel begins with the patriarch Abraham and ends this way: *Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ*. Did you catch that? After going through generations of names—mostly those of fathers, we hear a brief mention of Joseph, and then jump over to Mary: *of her was born Jesus*. Joseph is not really part of the equation, at least on the biological level. Especially in a time when childlessness was considered to be a personal shame, having no child of his own must have been a deep disappointment to Joseph. On a side note here: some of the early Church Fathers theorized that Joseph had children from a previous marriage, and married the Blessed Virgin Mary as an old widower—but there is not much evidence for this idea. So we can assume Joseph never had any children of his own.

But then it gets worse. Joseph’s betrothed—his legal wife—is now pregnant, though they had not yet lived together. Even if Joseph refused to believe that Mary was unfaithful, he still must have been very disappointed. So, *being a righteous man...he decided to divorce her quietly*. Thankfully, it starts to look up at this point. Joseph is visited by an angel in a dream, who tells him that *it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her*. Now I don’t know about you, but I don’t know anyone who was born not of woman but of the Holy Spirit on the physical level! So had Joseph not been a man of deep faith, who was eagerly awaiting the fulfilment of the promises of the prophets of a coming Savior, this message still would not have eased his mind. But thankfully for us, Joseph *did* believe.

And here is our first lesson from St. Joseph: in the face of disappointments in life, the only way forward is *faith*. For Joseph, faith that the joy that this child would bring would far surpass any desires he had for his own children. For us, faith that God always makes good on His promises, even if He does so in an unexpected way. Faith that believes *in all things*

*God works for the good of those who love him*, as St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans (8:28). Faith that knows, as the angel tells Mary, *nothing will be impossible for God*.

And that faith led St. Joseph to action, as it always should. He believed, and so he *obeyed*. He took Mary his wife into his home—this wife who would never really be his own, at least not in the usual sense. The Church has held from the very beginning that Mary remained a virgin for her whole life. She bore St. Joseph no children of his own. Her son was not really his: he belonged to another: He belonged to God. His name was not Joe Jr., as would have been custom, but Jesus. In faith, Joseph again obeyed the word of the angel, and *named him Jesus, because he [would] save his people from their sins*.

And here is our 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson from St. Joseph: authentic faith always leads to obedience to God, *even when you don't see the road ahead*. And the road ahead would not be a smooth one for St. Joseph. Such as, an arduous trip to Bethlehem with a very pregnant wife. Protecting Jesus from a sadistic king who would try to kill his foster-son. Another difficult journey, this time to going all the way to Egypt, in order to save this child. And then, when it was safe, making a new home in Nazareth. But most difficult of all was Joseph's giving this long-desired child over to the Father, time and time again. In the Scriptures, Joseph disappears completely from the picture when Jesus at age 12 gets lost, and is found in the Temple. Answering his mother's question over how He could have caused his parents so much anxiety, Jesus' answer would have gone right to Joseph's heart: *did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?* Yes, Joseph was most certainly a righteous, fatherly presence in young Jesus' life. But Joseph would be in 2<sup>nd</sup> place; His true Father was in heaven.

If the Gospel writers received the details of the infancy of Jesus from Mary, I think it is safe to conclude the utter silence of St. Joseph was on purpose. We might imagine Mary, smiling at the memories, saying: *he didn't want it any other way*. We might imagine humble St. Joseph saying that the greatest joy of his life was giving His foster Son His name: the name above all names: *Yeshuah*—Jesus. A name that means *Yahweh is salvation*. A name doesn't just point to Yahweh/God as most Biblical names did. No, His name *is* the very name of God, for as the angel says, *He will save His people from their sins*. In other words, this child truly is *Immanuel*, God with us! He is the Savior, the Messiah, the Redeemer. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords. What more can we say? He is *everything*.

And yet in spite of all he gave up, St. Joseph still had the untold joy of holding the King of the universe in his arms. Tonight, we have the joy of receiving this same King in the form of Sacrament. And so in spite of all the disappointments we may face in life, we are yet so very blessed. God has come close to us. So close, in fact, that many don't or won't recognize Him. But tonight, at this Holy Mass, we welcome Him into our bodies and our souls. We tell Him how much we love Him, how thankful we are for His coming to us, and how we look forward to being with Him forever, when our time comes. And with Joseph and Mary, we gaze on Him in adoration, and begin to know the peace that surpasses all understanding.