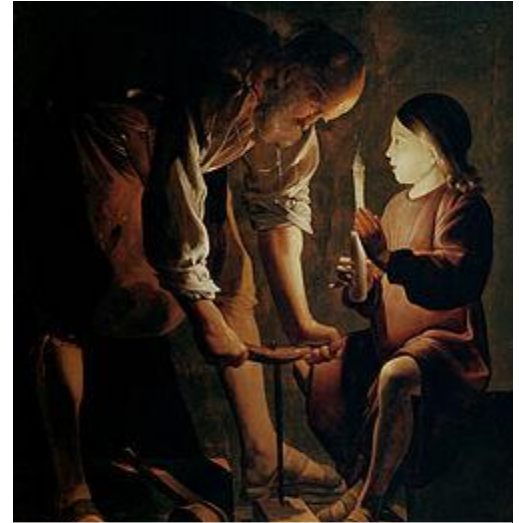


The focus of all today's readings turn on faith; its existence, its lack, and its prosper through God. In the opening verses of Paul's *Letter to Romans*, we have the section of the Bible that more than anything else led Martin Luther to kindle the Protestant Reformation with its foundation on salvation by grace through faith. In fact, the entire Christian Gospel is encompassed in just three verses in this chapter, *Romans* 1 verses 4 through 6, in which Paul assures us that we have received salvation by grace in Jesus Christ the Son of God, who was resurrected from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit in order that we might glorify God through obedience in faith. It is this faith that the evil King Ahaz is lacking in our Old Testament passage from Isaiah. Rather than depending on the providence of the The Lord God, Ahaz has taken the Temple gold of Jerusalem and given it to the Assyrian hoard, in the hopes that this unholy alliance will protect the Kingdom of Judah from the armies of Damascus. (See 2Ki.16:1-9) But Isaiah promises something that will restore Israel's faith in The Lord God. For there shall come to the Royal House of David a "Sign-Child" who is "God With Us." And it shall be this wondrous child Immanuel born of a virgin who will deliver Israel from death and despair and rekindle their faith. (See Is.7:14-16) The Psalm this morning laments the fact that the people's hope and faith have departed from the Children of God and left them destitute in an alien and violent world. Yet, in a moment of Messianic prophecy, the Psalmist proclaims three times in this morning's Psalm, "Lord if you will only show us your face, our faith will be restored and we shall be saved." (See Ps.80:3, 7, 19)



*Joseph the Carpenter* by George de La Tour

I'm not sure you could find a better earthly practitioner of this faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ than in the person of Jesus's earthly father, Joseph. I rejoice in this day when we read about St. Joseph in Matthew's Gospel. With perhaps the single exception of James, the younger brother of Jesus, Joseph of Nazareth is probably my favorite earthly person in the Gospels. He has so much to teach us.

What do we know of Joseph? Well, we know that he was a righteous man, because Scripture calls him as such. But we can also see the righteousness, the fairness of Joseph in his actions. We read that when he learned the girl he was engaged to marry was pregnant – and clearly pregnant by someone other than himself – when Joseph learns about Mary's condition, we get a glimpse of the generous spirit of Joseph in his reaction to this un-nerving surprise. Many men, having learned their fiancée was in this condition, many men I know would have been angry, wanting to lash out as such embarrassment, wanting to get even at such a betrayal. Why, we read today of many "honor killings" of women in Eastern cultures. In that kind of demented mindset, murdering a woman who has made this type of mistake will bring some kind of twisted honor back to the family. Never was something more misnamed than to call this murderous violence "honor killings."

But Joseph was worlds apart from this kind of thought and behavior. Upon learning that Mary was pregnant, we read that Joseph had in mind to dissolve the engagement privately, so as not to subject the young woman to public ridicule. (See Mt.1:19)

And this was certainly generous of spirit. The decision to deal with the matter quietly was certainly magnanimously minded on Joseph's part. But, I bet it still hurt. This kind of situation would have been incredibly painful, incredibly wounding to any young couple. And Joseph would have certainly shared a portion of the pain here. But he did not seek revenge. He sought to give some measure of mercy to Mary, in what he perceived was an embarrassing situation. Yes, we get the impression that Joseph was certainly a quietly generous, fair-minded man.

We also get the feeling that Joseph had developed a pretty strong relationship with The Lord. We read of four different times in the first two chapters of Matthew, we read of 4 different times where an Angel of the Lord came to talk with Joseph through his dreams. (See Mt.1:20-21; 2:13, 19, 22) And, when God's emissary came to Joseph in his dreams, Joseph took it seriously. When the Angel of The Lord assured Joseph that the child growing in Mary's womb was a Holy being, and that Joseph should go through with his planned marriage to the young woman, (See Mt.1:20-21) we get no indication that Joseph hesitated. And when an Angel of the Lord came to Joseph and warned him that Herod was determined to murder the young Christ, Joseph once again did not hesitate. Based on his firm understanding of the importance of God's word for his people, Joseph pulled up stakes right then and there, and moved from Judea down into Egypt. (See Mt.2:13) Joseph completely gave up his native culture and whatever safety-net he had among his own people; he gave all that up and took his family to Egypt, because the Lord had told him to. And that was all Joseph needed to hear. The Lord had given Joseph instruction, and that was good enough for him.

And Joseph knew too when it was time to return home. Because the Lord talked to him once again in a dream, and told him to go back to the Land of Israel. (See Mt.2:19) And Joseph knew the Lord wouldn't steer him wrong, so he returned home, because the Lord had said he should. Joseph's faith was that strong.

And as well as being quietly fair-minded, and of strong faith, we can see that Joseph was humble. He was, we are told, of the line of David, the most exalted family tree in the Hebrew world. (See Mt.1:16) But Joseph worked as a carpenter, probably what we would call a "finishing carpenter" in today's terms. Even though he was a "blue-blood," Joseph wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty, if that's what it took to feed his family. No, a carpenter's life was quite enough for this quiet, faithful, humble man. With the single possible exception of Mary, Joseph was probably the strongest earthly influence on the young Jesus. Can you imagine what a responsibility; to be a role model for the Son of God?

Joseph probably didn't live to be more than 55 or 60 at the most. The last mention we have of a living Joseph is when Jesus began teaching in the Temple at around the age of twelve. (See Lk.2:44-51) By the time the first miracle is performed at the wedding in Cana, Mary and her younger sons appear at the wedding feast without Joseph, (See Jn.2:12) so we can presume she was widowed by then.

But what a huge influence Joseph must have been on the young Christ, during the 20 years or so that they were together in this Holy Family. Of-course, Jesus was the Son of the Heavenly Father, but when he speaks with words of calm righteousness to his followers, when he quietly corrects the woman caught in adultery, when he faithfully walks the long road of his ministry, with a faith so strong that it can save the world, and lastly when he humbly submits his back to the scourge and his beautiful body to the agony of the Cross, when Our Lord does all these things with such quiet, righteous, faithful, and humble spirit, I think we have to wonder: How much of an influence did His earthly father Joseph have, in forming these holy qualities? And, in our own lives, who will we influence – for good or for ill – what kind of examples will we be for others, as we walk the path that The Lord has set before us? Will we be like Joseph, the strong, quiet, righteous, faithful, humble carpenter who stands there in the stable, providing the firm foundation furnishing the steadfast backdrop to the miracle in the manger? Can we too live our lives that way for the good of those who look to us for guidance?

I always wear a particular little cross. It is the cross I wear beneath my clothing closest to my heart. You will probably never see it. It's a small gold cross from my mother's home town in Edgefield. I wear it around my neck on a slender gold chain that I bought many years ago in my father's home town of Mt. Pleasant. This little gold cross never leaves my person, except on very rare occasions, such as when I have to go through some hospital surgery, or if I am to go swimming in salt water. Of all the crosses in the world, this little cross is the one I hold most dear.

And next to this cross worn around my neck there is a tiny gold medallion. It carries on it the traditional image of St. Joseph holding the Christ Child and the Easter Lilly. I wear the St. Joseph it to remind myself of who I may be to those around me. What kind of person am I, not only in my own heart, but what kind of person am I in the eyes of others?

So, this final Sunday in Advent, as we begin to gaze expectantly on the Holy Family, who is it that will be influenced by you this coming year? Will there be someone for whom you will provide a model of fairness, and courage, and faith, and humility?

Dear people, everyone in life, sooner or later, needs somebody to look up to? What will they see when it's your turn? Who is looking up to you right now for wisdom, and guidance, and strength? In the unfolding drama of life, who will you be Joseph to this coming year? Are you ready for the part?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+ 12/07/16