

Homily  
Thunder Bay  
12/16/07  
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## Odd Man Out

This week, we look back two thousand years, to the birth of Jesus. We know a few things about Jesus, and also about his mother Mary. But we do not know much about the man named Joseph, who raised Jesus. Joseph is a man of mystery, the odd man out, in the story of the birth of Jesus.

We look this morning at Joseph, and things that matter.

We do know a few things about Joseph. At least, we think we do. After all, it was so long ago, with so many versions of the story. But we know for sure that Joseph was Mary's husband.

Or -- was he? Some of the accounts say that, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary were not married, only engaged.

Well, we know that, even if he was not Mary's husband, still he was her steady fellow, her boyfriend, her lover.

Or -- was he? According to an angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream, her lover was not Joseph, but God, acting through the Holy Spirit. Mt 1:20. (Kids, I don't understand that one either.)

We don't even know if Joseph was the father of Jesus. Some accounts suggest that Joseph was more like a foster father, or a stepfather to Jesus.

Like a big ball of yarn, this story is tangled in places, and it can be confusing. But maybe the exact status of Joseph -- husband, lover, father -- doesn't matter so much. Maybe there are more important things to know about him.

Like his character, for example -- the sort of human being he was.

In the gospel according to Matthew, we are told that “[Jesus’] mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph . . . was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly,” or as we would say, break off the engagement. Mt 1:18.

Joseph was tempted. You might be too. If you were a man engaged to be married to a woman, and she was a virgin, or so you believed, yet one day she turns up pregnant, and you know you’re not the father -- what do you make of this?

Joseph reacts predictably at first, and later, not so predictably. We are told that he was a righteous man. Probably that means he wanted to do the right thing, whatever that turned out to be. From what we know of the customs of that time and place, the right thing was probably to break off the engagement. Many reasonable people, then and now, might say that Mary apparently made a big mistake when she became pregnant.

Joseph wants to do the divorce quietly, so as not to subject her to public shame, as presumably he himself has been subjected, by her. He was a thoughtful, sensitive, big-hearted man. And courageous – the penalty for adultery in those days was that they stoned you to death. (When Jesus later on helped a woman whom a mob was ready to stone, by saying, Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone – that woman could have been his mother, except for what Joseph did.)

Bailing out is only Joseph’s first reaction. Then, he changes his mind. Mt 1:19.

A surprisingly liberal reaction, more so than it would be today. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we barely realize how shame-based that society was, two thousand years ago. No sentiment was stronger than shame. No punishment was felt more keenly, than public disgrace.

We hear echoes of that extreme sensitivity to shame even today. A Muslim father in Mississauga discovers that his sixteen-year-old daughter has been taking off her head covering – her hijab (hee-job) – at school each morning,

and then putting it back on, before returning home in the evening. She has been pretending to honour her family's religious customs -- but only pretending.

Her father chokes her to death. How terrible! How awful! That is an extreme sensitivity to shame at work.

But as Joseph considers divorce, an angel appears to him in a dream, saying, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus . . ." Mk 1:20.

There's nothing to be ashamed about, the angel is saying. There's no disgrace. All will be well. In fact, something fantastic is about to happen.

Joseph decides to follow the angel's counsel, and takes Mary home as his wife. If there is anything to forgive, he forgives her. He names the boy Jesus, as instructed.

And he raises Jesus as his own.

So, for the first time, but not the last time in Jesus' life – actually, before he even had a life – we witness, in what Joseph does, the remarkable rejection of a common, legalistic, shame-based, kneejerk, public morality (getting a quiet, quickie divorce), and its measured replacement by a transcendent, higher law, a more private, heart-based law – that advances way beyond shame, to the realm of sensitivity, love, and forgiveness.

When you really think about what Joseph did, it is awesome.

Well, what of Joseph's belief in dreams? His traditional religious faith? Do they matter?

What matters is not the stuff we can quibble over, as religious people unfortunately have been quibbling for centuries. What matters, finally, is what a person does. Joseph acts magnificently.

He chooses to ignore the apparent indiscretion. He chooses to marry the young woman he set out to marry, and to raise her son, no matter where he

came from, as if he were his own. So far as we know, without recriminations, or shaming, or even scorekeeping.

In our skeptical age, we indulge in skeptical questions like, How much of this fabulous story can we believe? Stories of the births of other religious leaders, like Confucius and Buddha, are not nearly so wild as this one.

Who knows how much of it is true? None of us were there. None of us saw and heard, with our own eyes and ears. Agnosticism is sometimes very convenient.

Anyway, does it really matter so much, whether it happened this way, or some other way? Perhaps that's the wrong conversation. This is the way the story was remembered, crafted, written down, and retold, for two thousand years. This is the way it comes down to us today, as part of our own heritage, our birthright. Like some great storms that create their own weather systems, over the centuries this story has created its own reality. Maybe that has to be enough.

Retelling the story, we learn about some of the people, whose lives were touched by the birth of Jesus. Remember the shepherds, trembling as they watched their sheep that night?

And the magi, the three wise men who journeyed across the desert, bearing gifts for the baby Jesus – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Incidentally, myrrh is a perfume.) Of the magi, T. S. Eliot wrote:

“A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For the journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter. . . .

“And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.”

The authorities play cameo roles: Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor, collecting taxes; Quirinius, governor of Syria; and King Herod, anxious to

eliminate any threat to his throne, even a newborn child. As a result, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus had to hide in Egypt for a while.

We can even acquire a whiff of the animals in the stable where Jesus was born. A fanciful whiff, no doubt, but entertaining, like Pippin the Pig and his crew. It was that exuberant showman, Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan Order, who in the year 1223, in Greccio, Italy, staged the first Christmas pageant in church, with two young parents and a baby, and living, breathing, noisy, smelly animals, an ox and an ass, that wandered through the sanctuary during the service.

No. N – O.

The story of the birth of Jesus also gives us glimpses of a shadowy God, partly screened by his mediators, the angels.

But as for Joseph – well, he is at the dramatic center of this story. He's the anchor. His decisions set the tone and drive the action. He follows the compelling counsel of his dreams. He transcends his own sensitivity toward shame. He takes Mary home as his wife.

Later, he leads his family to Bethlehem, looks for but cannot find a place to stay, finally discovers a stable to spend the night in. (A hard-working guy.) Presumably, he helps with the birth. Finally, and most importantly, he raises Jesus as his own.

And yet, somehow, Joseph never quite makes it to center stage.

Two thousand years later, he remains for us, an ordinary man with a humble role in a great, enduring story. A decent man, choosing to do a decent thing.

This holiday season, let us pay homage to  
decent people  
doing decent things  
quietly.

Amen.