

22nd December 2019 (Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year A)

Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 23(24):1-6; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24.

'Joseph was a righteous man.'

On this last Sunday in Advent, only two days before we celebrate the great mystery of the incarnation, God who takes on sinful human form, we are invited to reflect on what this great event might have looked like for Mary and Joseph.

Matthew informs us that Mary was already betrothed to Joseph; the marriage contract had been signed and the price for the bride had been paid. Mary and Joseph were legally husband and wife. Usually, especially if the bride is still too young, she stayed at her father's house for one or more years, until the time her husband takes her to his own, or his father's, house. The book of Deuteronomy (22:23-27) lays down that a woman, who during this period of time has sexual relations with a man other than her husband, may be stoned to death. This was the situation Mary and Joseph found themselves in; this is the situation the Son of God is going to be born in!

Joseph is a man of honour; he is a just and righteous man. The just man is guided by the law of the Torah. He knows that since his young wife is carrying a child that is not his own, he has the duty to expose her adulterous action, potentially leading to her death. Even if Mary were not stoned to death, having been outed as an adulteress, she would have to live under the shadow of this public disgrace all her life. Joseph's attitude towards his young wife foreshadows Jesus' attitude towards sinners. In the New Testament, justice does not simply mean a strict application of the law, but it also means to imitate God's mercy and kindness. In his justice and righteousness, Joseph tries to avoid humiliating Mary, and plans to divorce her informally, by giving her a written notice informing her that he was divorcing her, and freeing her to marry another man.

The birth of the Son of God in Bethlehem, the presence of God in our midst, inaugurates amongst us a time of mercy and justice. Jesus (Joshua), a name that means 'God saves,' has come with a mission to save humanity from their sins. Jesus does this, not by applying the Law of the Old Testament strictly, but by invoking God's mercy and love. While human justice is required to apply the letter of the law, since one of the roles of human justice is to protect society from those who abuse the 'social contract,' Divine justice is always tempered by mercy and love. God's justice is perfect because it also includes love and mercy; God who understands our humanity, our sinfulness and our weakness, is always prepared to forgive us and welcome us back.

Joseph teaches us how, like God, we too can be just and righteous yet kind and merciful. We obey God's law not by simply applying the letter of the law, but also by being living examples of God's mercy and love. Perhaps it would be a good start for us to make sure that we obey the letter of the law in everything that applies to ourselves, and apply God's mercy to everything that applies to our sisters and brothers.

This Christmas let us meditate the mystery of the Son of God, God with us, who was ready to abandon his status as God and be born as a small, weak, humble, human child and walk all the way to the cross to save us from our sins. How can I live this great mystery by setting aside judging others and instead reaching out to them in mercy? Can I take Joseph as my role model this Christmas and in the coming New Year, and be just and righteous in imitating God's love and mercy?

Happy Christmas

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