

4th Sunday Advent Year "A"
December 17-18, 2022

"Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid."

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

More than once, those with Minneapolis roots have told me that they can tell that I am from Saint Paul based upon the questions I ask in general conversation. Where did you go to high school? What street did you live on? While these seem like innocent enough questions to me, apparently, they betray a small-town attitude unbecoming of our larger "twin" to the west. With a cost of living that is 6.1% lower and home prices 19% lower, this side of the river has its advantages. I'm content.

We in the capital city are in good company, because in ancient Israel, identity by family name, town and ancestry was critically important. Despite his humble means, Joseph came from a royal lineage. The gospels of Luke and Matthew diverge concerning some details of Joseph's genealogy, such as the name of Joseph's father. But they both mark his descent from David, the greatest king of Israel.¹ 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."²

Both genealogies establish the **legitimate fatherhood** of St. Joseph. St. Matthew presents Joseph as the legal father who validly transmits Davidic descent. Joseph's fatherhood is more than adoptive since he was already betrothed to Mary in a juridically binding manner at the time of our Lord's Conception. In taking Mary into his home, Joseph entered the final phase of Jewish marriage, begun already with their betrothal.

For Jews the questions, 'Who are you?' and 'Where did you come from?' were significant. The earliest theologians had no doubt: our Lord is "of the seed of David by the birth he has from Mary." The angel directed Joseph's to accept his betrothed and take her into his home as his wife.

¹ Cf. **Matt 1:16** - "...*Jacob* the father of Joseph the husband of Mary..." **Luke 3:23** - "He [Jesus] was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of *Heli*" (or spelled *Eli*).

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

Just as Joseph was caught off guard by the news, this account has puzzled theologians for centuries as well. The early Church Fathers struggled to make sense of this passage. They saw three distinct possibilities.

Some believed that Joseph suspected Mary of infidelity.³ A text— now known to be apocryphal— from the year A.D. 200 took this position and influenced later writers, including Sts. Augustine and John Chrysostom. But it begs the question. Scripture relates that Joseph was a righteous man; as such, he would have scrupulously followed the Mosaic Law, and subjected Mary to its severe punishment.

Others surmised he had withheld moral judgment, being genuinely perplexed by the turn of events. In short, he was confused. For example, St. Jerome held: “This may be considered a testimony to Mary, that Joseph, confident in her purity, and wondering at what had happened, covered in silence that mystery which he could not explain.”⁴

Still others thought that Joseph believed in Mary’s purity all along, but was awestruck and felt unworthy of the role of guardian.⁵ In the supplement to his *Summa Theologiae*, Saint Thomas Aquinas embraced this position that Joseph thought to dismiss Mary “because in reverence for her sanctity, he feared to cohabit with her.”⁶ Perhaps it was a mixture of all these thoughts that occupied his mind in that moment.

Whatever his reason or reasons, St. Joseph played an indispensable role in the divine drama of Christmas. Do not run away from the mystery embrace it. Let us approach the Christ-child with the same wonder and awe as St. Joseph, and yet with an angel’s assurance, we have no fear in taking Christ into the home of our heart.

All the pieces are now in place. In some respects, St. Joseph is the last. And the calendar gives us a full final week in which to prepare. We have no excuses this year. We have the time we need. In this last week of

³ S. Augustine (Epist. 52, ad Macedon.),

⁴ Jerome, cited by Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, in Matthew 1,19

⁵ Origen, St. Basil, Theophylact, St. Bernard, and St. Bridget of Sweden all hold that Joseph intended to divorce the Virgin, not because of infidelity, but because he felt unworthy to be Mary’s guardian.

⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, *Suppl.* Q. 62, A.3, ad 2.

Advent, let us imitate Joseph's humility. By our submission to and acceptance of God's will. In doing so we will have true peace and joy.