

**December 22, 2019 – Guilty Until Proven Innocent**

**Given by Rev. Mattei**

We are all familiar with the story of the angel Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary that she will bear a son of God through the power of the Spirit. We know of Mary’s wondering about the feasibility of God’s plan through her since she was not married yet. We know of Gabriel’s affirmation of God’s infinite power and of Mary’s availability to the will of God.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Contrarily to the gospel of Luke, Matthew’s emphasis is not on Mary. It is on Jesus through the experience of Joseph. Joseph also has an angelic encounter that calls him into cooperation with the divine will. Matthew tells us that when Mary “was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” Joseph resolved to let her go quietly. Joseph is described by Matthew as a righteous man. In biblical times, righteousness was associated with just and ethical action and with following God’s commands as prescribed by the words of wisdom of the Jewish tradition.

In Matthew’s account, not only does Jesus come from God. Jesus, whose name means “God saves”, will also manifest God’s presence with the people. He is Emmanuel, God-with-us, coming to save the people from their sins. (This opening reference to Jesus as God’s presence serves as a bookend to the resurrected Jesus’ promise to be with the disciples until the end of the age in the last line of the gospel, Matthew 28:20). The presence of God saves! Where God is there is Love, there is healing and the fullness of life. Where God is there is an abundance of life (a.k.a. the Kingdom of God/Heaven, grace, Shalom, life eternal). When God is present (Emmanuel), God saves (Jesus).

Joseph is very much part of the story: as the future adoptive father, he has a role to play. The knowledge of Mary’s pregnancy and presumed unfaithfulness must have thrown Joseph into intense shock, disbelief, and disturbing confusion. He is aware of the social norm in regard to spousal unfaithfulness.[[2]](#footnote-2) Everyone would have a hard time believing Mary’s fantastic story. No one would even complain if he denounced Mary publicly. This would be well within his legal rights. But the story tells us that Joseph, being the righteous man he is, doesn’t want her publicly disgraced and goes way beyond the social norm. He renounces his personal rights and chooses the higher ground of caring for Mary even as his heart is in great turmoil. Joseph rises from his personal defeat and apparent betrayal and doesn’t care about restoring his honor. He is concerned about the girl he loves who has nonetheless broken his heart. He knows her life is in danger.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The drama that unfolds does not offer all the details of the anguish Joseph must have experienced. I wonder how stunned Joseph must have been at the revelation that Mary was with child. I wonder what kind of conversation, heated or otherwise, there must have been between Joseph and Mary. What was she talking about? How could it possibly be that God chose to become flesh through an unwed teenager? How dare she insult Joseph’s intelligence and take advantage of his kindness? And what about his shattered dreams? The story was hard to digest: would God really choose to become flesh, to be Immanuel, God with us, through a young woman whose testimony bordered between the fantastic and the insane? Joseph apparently does not remember the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah, who promises the closeness of God through the birth of a child to a young woman.

What is your experience when your path in life comes to a fork? When you have to make hard decisions, what do you value? How do you prioritize? How do you decide what is the truth, a partial truth, a fantasy, a lie? At times it is evident we are challenged to choose between good and evil. Often times, the choices we are called to make are between something good and something better. Sometimes, we need to choose between the law and our values, what makes us decent human beings. Sometimes we need to realize that even if the law is necessary for an ordered life together, for the respect of the common good, and for the protection of our way of life, the law can also be cruel and impersonal and can cause unnecessary hardship, demonization and even death. One would ask: “What good does it do to us to have a law and not apply it?” That’s a fair question. But would we have Jesus if Joseph asked for the law to be applied? If a law is cruel and dehumanizing should the people amend it or even repeal it?

Joseph did not want a cruel law being applied to Mary. He chose life over honor, new possibilities over rules and regulations. It must have been a tormented decision to let Mary go, but he couldn’t possibly live with the memory of her public disgrace and stoning. He did not want to be part of an action declared legal in the books but corrosive in the soul. He was better than that! He needed to resist the urge to vengeance through the recourse to a law that was squarely on his side. But what benefit would ultimately come to him by a law that prescribed a cruel and violent act? How can you split your religion from your civic duty? How do you apply your faith to your public actions? What authority is higher, God or man?

Undoubtedly, Joseph engaged in deep soul searching. His righteousness prompted him to rise from his assured legal rights to his uncommon ethical stance. His personal struggle moved him to decide to look at Mary more than he looked at himself. Talk about sacrificial love! He was not simply a just man. Justice refers to the application of civil laws relative to a certain people at a certain time and place. He was rather known as a righteous person, one who is principled, ready to consider the application of the law from all angles, ready to listen and be flexible and ready to choose higher values.

Yet, his decision-making is not complete. Even though he goes to bed with a decision he is finally comfortable with, his discernment process continues. Joseph takes a decision and then goes to sleep on it. And during his sleep, he gets in touch with a higher self yet and is moved by faith. An angelic voice encourages him to simply trust. The spiritual process that moves one to make the leap of faith may begin with complex logical reasoning but ends with the courage that allows one to detach and let go of strategies that previously made all the sense in the world. The saying “If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it’s yours. If it does not, it was never meant to be.” is a good saying to keep in mind. Once we are able to be considerate and make life-giving choices for the good of all, we conclude that the leap of faith is indeed simple. The truth of our choice becomes readily evident and freeing. The famous doctor of the Church, Thomas Aquinas, once said “truth never harms or freightens.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

When we get to that point, we feel lighter, grounded, and unconcerned with the consequences, come what may. When we get to that point, we are aware of the presence of God, the Emmanuel, and that presence saves us from ourselves, from making harmful decisions, from our rigid reasoning and un-budging strategies. When we choose to trust and abide by God’s higher authority, we opt for the road less traveled, for a counter-cultural way of life, and do not conform to the choices of this world.[[5]](#footnote-5) When that happens, we make manifest the presence of God to others, and there is hope, there is salvation for the afflicted, justice for the abused, shelter for the scared, community for the unwanted, and life is sacred again.

May we know the joy of faith; may we find joy in knowing we are called to be part of God’s plan of salvation for the world; and may we prepare for the birth of Jesus in our hearts. Amen.

1. Luke 1:26-38 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Exodus 20:14; Proverbs 5:18-23; Leviticus 20:10; Malachi 3:5; John 8:4-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Deuteronomy 22:20-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thomas Aquinas, God’s Nature, in Daniel Ladinsky, Love Poems From God (Penguin Compass, 2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Romans 12:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)