

## St Joseph

### Community Meeting 30<sup>th</sup> April 2021

There are only two places in the Gospels when the name of Jesus is on someone's lips. We are all familiar with the Good Thief who explicitly calls Jesus by name when turning to Him on the cross says: *Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom* (Luke 23:42). Yet at the very beginning of His human life Matthew tells us of the angel's reassurance: *Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child she had conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins* (Matt 1:20-21). Implicitly Joseph is the only other person who calls Jesus by His name. The Jewish Sages say that naming a child is a most profound spiritual moment for the name is a statement of the child's character, specialness and path in life. For at the beginning of life we are given a name and at the end of life a 'good name' is all that we take with us (Talmud – Brachot 7b). Further the Talmud is clear that the naming of a child is indeed prophetic because it is always an angel, God's own messenger, who whispers to the parents the name that the new child will embody. Joseph then is a prophet; having devoted himself to God in his daily life, he is open and opened to, behold this 'new thing' God is doing, God embodying His own divinity. It is not too much then to personalise Isaiah's prophecy: *God said, surely here is my child Joseph who will not lie; so, He said He was His people's Saviour* (cf Is 63:8).

At the other end of Jesus' earthly life, it is the Good Thief who entrusts himself and desire to be made anew to his Saviour. Jesus, remember me: re-create me, hold me always in Your Salvation because apart from you I have nothing. And Jesus again sees his child, who does not lie and so He says He is His people's salvation *Today you will be with me in Paradise*. Like Joseph, this thief has the humility to look beyond his faults and failings to see the glory of God shining in the face of Christ. Both did so in faith, not yet seeing the fulness of that glory, yet ready to stand trustfully before their God, accepting the need and willingness to grow in His likeness. Such a stance brought its own difficulties. Joseph needed to take to heart and act upon the angelic messenger's words, delving to the roots of the Torah's prescriptions believing the Giver of the Word and the Word were One. The thief, arguably has nothing obvious to lose he even accepted that he was being punished for crimes he had committed. Yet his heart and voice were contrary to those of the crowd. The Imageo Dei within him recognised its origins and in the moment when the Godly heart spoke to the fleshly heart, he stripped himself of everything else in order to accept Jesus' promise of salvation. Joseph and the thief are totally human guides to the beauty of gospel self-denial which is to say 'yes' to divine love and acceptance now, today, for as long as 'today' lasts, with absolute certainty and on them to stake our lives.

The dynamic active power of God in Jesus is always at work enabling us to conceive the Word in our hearts and to have Christ formed in us. It's not however meant to be an endurance exercise! The coming week is our holiday. Let us enjoy them, let them be a time of recreation. We cannot doubt that the scriptures we listen to and read will teach us what it is to love, to hope, to be poor in spirit, to suffer and to be saved. Yet within these days let us rejoice in Jesus' invitation to give back to God who we are as He takes such pleasure in creating and re-creating each one of us.

## Quotes from St Teresa

*“I took for my advocate and lord the glorious Saint Joseph and commended myself earnestly to him; and I found that this my father and lord delivered me both from this trouble and also from other and greater troubles concerning my honour and the loss of my soul, and that he gave me greater blessings than I could ask of him. I do not remember even now that I have ever asked anything of him which he has failed to grant... This has also been the experience of other persons whom I have advised to commend themselves to him; and even to-day there are many who have great devotion to him through having newly experienced this truth.” “I wish I could persuade everyone to be devoted to this glorious saint, for I have great experience of the blessings which he can obtain from God. I have never known anyone to be truly devoted to him and render him particular services who did not notably advance in virtue, for he gives very real help to souls who commend themselves to him. For some years now, I think, I have made some request of him every year on his festival and I have always had it granted. If my petition is in any way ill directed, he directs it aright for my greater good.”*

*“I only beg, for the love of God, that anyone who does not believe me will put what I say to the test, and he will see by experience what great advantages come from his commending himself to this glorious patriarch and having devotion to him.*

*Those who practice prayer should have a special affection for him always*

## St Joseph

It has become something of a truism to say that we know very little of St Joseph’s life. Yet we do know that the responsibilities he accepts from God show an extraordinary trust – indeed an extraordinary mutual trust. So, our starting point needs to be that Joseph is called. He is given a vocation in life. He was not consulted in one sense, rather the hand of God formed him before he was in the womb for his role, and then, tapped him on the shoulder and invited him to fulfil it. St Teresa understands the uniqueness of his mission: *I am astonished at the great favours which God has bestowed on me through this blessed saint, and at the perils from which He has freed me, both in body and in soul. To other saints the Lord seems to have given grace to succour us in some of our necessities but of this glorious saint my experience is that he succours us in them all and that the Lord wishes to teach us that as He was Himself subject to him on earth (for, being His guardian and being called His father, he could command Him) just so in Heaven He still does all that he asks. She goes on to make it clear that his role is inseparable from Mary’s: I do not know how anyone can think of the Queen of the Angels, during the time that she suffered so much with the Child Jesus, without giving thanks to Saint Joseph for the way he helped them. If anyone cannot find a master to teach him how to pray, let him take this glorious saint as his master and he will not go astray (Life chapter 6)*

4 characteristics:

Simple Obedience

Hidden Devotedness

A Life of Labour

Responsibility

## Simple Obedience

Although St Joseph says nothing, his action and promptness in action show us the absoluteness of his commitment to his task.

When Joseph heard the call, he obeyed with no hesitation or objection. We hear of two great moments of trial: Mary's pregnancy and the flight into Egypt. Joseph's decisions and actions were not acquired on the spot but the fruit of long habit. *Blessed the man who fears the Lord, who delights in His commandment* (Ps 111). Reverence perhaps better conveys the heart of 'fear of the Lord.' That is the resolved dedication of oneself to accomplishing God's will through a life of obedience which is the everyday living out of our faith. We shall be in an emergency what we have trained ourselves to be in little things!

We don't always get it right first time – and again that is where Joseph is a great comforter! Joseph we are told was a just man, that means he lived a way of life honouring God mainly through love and obedience to the Law. The Law of course giving access to discerning the divine will. According to the Torah an adulteress was to be stoned. Under Roman Law the Jewish people were not permitted to exercise capital punishment themselves (hence Jesus before Pilate although charge of blasphemy if proven meant stoning), the standard practise was divorce with a public trial. Yet, Joseph hesitates to 'put her to shame', deciding instead upon a private divorce – maybe he still loves her, pities her...it was the result of careful discernment of God's will as expressed in the Law given to Moses, consideration of those involved and knowledge of the social and legal order of the time.

However, Joseph is on the cusp of the wave of change between the Old Covenant and the New. He made his decision according to the OT Law while already living in the NT era – the Incarnation was underway. On the testimony of a dream, which he recognises as coming from God, not his own subconscious, he takes Mary for his wife and her child as his; Jesus Son of God, Son of David. Joseph gave Mary and Jesus status, a home, a role model. There is no self-pity, no wounded dignity, no mistrust, instead compassion, trust and forgive-ness. We are told nothing about the decision making, just that Joseph made the decision with no concept of its importance or foreknowledge of who Jesus would be. And having learned from this experience, he follows the directives of another dream and travels with Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

## Hidden Devotedness

Joseph then is called to play a unique and essential part in God's design of salvation and called along with Mary in a parentage that was for both of them out of the normal course of events. In our small way we are called, likewise invited to play our part in God's purposes, to fulfil our mission and to do so along with the others whom God gives us. Our Rule speaks

movingly of Brocard and the brothers gathered on Mount Carmel; each called personally to allegiance in Jesus Christ yet bound to one another by that allegiance.

Like that original community on Mount Carmel, our families and circle of friends, those whom we are able to help and support may be few in number, but they form our community. It should not take us by surprise then to realise that St Joseph was a community man: he had a family, a social network, religious community; he had family and friends to care for, laugh with, be at ease with. We might think he had it was easy living with the Incarnate Son of God and the Blessed Virgin Mary. But difficulties there surely were and we have only to read the gospel of Luke to realise that some problems are nobody's fault yet they do challenge community relationships, not matter how loving and grace filled. There was tension and distress when Jesus went missing for 3 days. Joseph doesn't remonstrate but Mary does, speaking for the both of them, their anxiety is palpable. It is legitimate, and it occurred in the perfect community. Pain and distancing come at that moment in everyone's life when we experience the shock of misunderstanding from those we love. It is a painful awakening into adult reality to discover that we may love and be loved and still not understand or be understood. This mutual incomprehension is natural as is the struggle to come to terms with it: different ways of looking at the world, which remain individual no matter the shared principles.

What is striking is that the misunderstanding, the hurt, were resolved in the Temple. It is in prayer, in common prayer that reconciliations are forged, they we are able to look beyond the present to the overarching design of the Father. When we realise this, we recognise how prudent St Albert is when he speaks of meetings and correction of the brethren (point 13). St Albert emphasises that it should be on Sunday, the Day of the Lord, is the occasion for discussion of spiritual welfare and the loving correction of indiscretions and failings. Sunday the day given most especially to divine worship and the celebration of Mass.

What I sense is also important is Luke's telling phrase *his parents wondered* at what Jesus said; neither Joseph nor Mary are unthinking marionettes! Our life too may appear 'restricted', no station to keep up, no great show, the pressures and joys 'small'. This is precisely the point Teresa grasped when she read the Rule, and contemplated St Joseph, hidden lives of devotedness may turn out to have great and powerful consequences. A longing to be useful is easy to confuse with a longing to be someone/to have something to show for one's work and efforts. No, the quiet, thoughtful, prayerful ordinariness of St Joseph hidden with Mary and Jesus is our example and desire.

### Life of Labour

Hidden behind anything we do in our everyday is a person with his or her demands, need and expectations. Joseph's task, his immediate task was to look after Mary and Jesus, to provide for and protect them, to take responsibility for them. These were the persons 'hidden behind' his daily, no doubt unexciting, tasks, though speaking with craftsmen and workmen I know there is also a sense of pride in a job well done, the frisson of rising to a

challenge and the relief at having completed a quality job on time. I also know just who skilled they are in their field of expertise! As the carpenter in Nazareth Joseph would have been *the* one to go to for virtually anything that needed to be made of wood – household items, agricultural tools; certainly, he would have been respected for his trade work. However, I believe he would have been privy to the lives, hopes and dreams, worries and disord of his neighbours and surrounding villagers, a point of reference, of advice, a listening ear, perhaps even asked to help restore harmony where there was tension. He must have been a man of great integrity and discretion. That he was ‘successful’ technically and personally, embodying trust, I think we may confidently assume by the fact that Jesus too was the village carpenter, he followed in his adopted father’s footsteps, inheriting the place Joseph had; I doubt his neighbours and surrounding villagers would have given him any work or time of day if they did not see in him the attributes Joseph had taught and passed on!

Our work, our activity, are always orientated towards the other, towards our community. But, of course, we too go further. God’s call is behind or within the task at hand, however exulted or lowly. As St Paul says: *whatever your task, work heartily as serving the Lord...knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you are serving the Lord Jesus Christ* (Col. 3:23-24). Such directedness is helpful proof against the sort of idleness that dissipates our love and energy as our minds and hearts search around for something ‘interesting’ to mull over, or share/gossip about. Or as St Albert so puts it *you must give yourselves to work of some kind so that the devil may always find you busy; no idleness on your part must give him a chance to pierce your soul* (17).

There is no mention of God working a miracle to save Joseph from hard work, trouble, human foresight or carefulness! Blessed, guarded and guided through Joseph was he still had to work. In this his life is like ours. It can seem most unrewarding, but we need to face the fact that God means to help us in our work, not dispense us from it!

### Responsibility

With all of the above St Joseph is the greatest steward and most responsible man on earth! He reverses Cain’s *Am I my brother’s keeper?* overturning that angry refusal of responsibility. He had no idea what he was letting himself in for! Neither do we. Daily we are called upon to make choices between ourselves and God, between ourselves and others. Often, we have no idea of the consequences of those decisions, but how important the seemingly trivial might be.

Perhaps a simple reading of the Bible texts offers us a Joseph who cuts no dash. He disappears from the pages of the Gospel having said not a single word, his task completed. But when we really look at St Joseph, we see the fruit of his inner life. In knowing how to listen, to obey, he knows how to be in charge, to be guardian. Jesus is Joseph’s son in love. And how happy he must have been! Do we often, ever think of Joseph as a happy, joyous husband, father, friend? Doing God’s will has far reaching consequences; making hidden choices all day long, having that silent attentive heart open to the Spirit’s promptings, prepare the ground for Christ’s birth and growth our souls as they did in St Joseph’s. Then we share with St Joseph in the work of guardianship, nurture the tiny beginnings of the mystery of salvation in our own hearts, lives and community, upbuilding of the Church, Christ’s Body. With joyful hearts and total openness, we are called by name to live *“a life hidden with Christ in God”* – what more could be want?