

Homily for the Solemnity of St Joseph

By Fr Steele Hartmann

“Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly” (Mt 1:19). This means, of course, that Joseph believed Mary to be guilty of fornication with another man, the penalty for which was death. As I pondered on this I was reminded of the story of the adulterous woman in John’s Gospel (cf. Jn 8:1-11) in which the scribes and Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman caught committing adultery. The scribes and the Pharisees demand that Jesus condemn the woman, which the Law required and which Jesus was unwilling to do. Instead he quietly offers mercy: “Neither do I condemn you. Go away and sin no more”. Thus Jesus is a righteous man, a just man, one who is merciful as God is merciful, after the manner of his father, Joseph; Jesus was his father’s son.

The scribes and the Pharisees were pious Jews. They sought to be righteous through obedience to all God’s commands. In the Gospels they are portrayed as a type, and like all stereotypes it does them an injustice. That said, in the Gospels the scribes and the Pharisees are those who are strict in doctrine and ritual, but without a spirit of piety. They lay stress upon the outward show of religion and morality, and assume a superiority on that account; they are thus self-righteous, instead of being righteous. It is to guard against this attitude that Jesus warns his followers: “If your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20).

In the little story of Joseph in today’s Gospel we are told that Joseph was a righteous man. Because he believes Mary guilty of unchastity, he plans to divorce her. In this he is fulfilling his legal duty by repudiating her; this he plans to do for he is a righteous man. It is also because of his justice, his righteousness, and not because of his kindness, that he is unwilling to expose Mary to public shame. He determines to keep the Law in a manner in keeping with the way Jesus was later to teach us: “So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 7:12). In so doing he demonstrates a righteousness that goes beyond that of the scribes and the Pharisees for it is expressed in love, and given to all, without discrimination, to the deserving and the undeserving alike. Thus Joseph is the just man who is merciful as God is merciful. We can have every confidence, then, that he has entered the kingdom of heaven.

Joseph, however, does not carry out his planned course of action. He does not repudiate Mary; instead he takes her as his wife. In this Joseph shows that he is the truly righteous man, one who obeys God's commands. When God spoke to him and said, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1:20), Joseph did as the Lord commanded. The idea of a virginal conception was unknown in Joseph's time; one cannot suppose that Joseph would have understood the explanation given him. Thus Joseph's obedience could not have come easily to him, believing as he did that Mary had been unfaithful, unless he had long practised this virtue. Yet he did obey when heard God's voice, for he was a righteous man.

When I was overseas for study I looked at The Showings of Julian of Norwich, the shorter version of her vision of Christ on the cross. As I read her work I became aware that the image of the Virgin Mary had a role to play for Julian. She has three pictures of Mary: the first as a young girl saying her "Yes" to God, the second was of Mary standing at the foot of the cross, and the third of Mary being crowned Queen of heaven. For Julian these represent the road markers and the milestones on the journey of life. With her vision of Christ crucified Julian has attained her long-desired second milestone, and so she looks forward confidently to attaining the third. For Julian these pictorial images sum up her call. They represent for her where she wants to go and the type of person she wants to be. She needed only to see them or recall them to be instantly reminded of her call and her desire. Thus she kept herself determinedly on the way. We ourselves could similarly benefit were we to seek and find some image that would remind us of our call. We would not need to study it especially for it to work its power on us, for just a quick look would remind us, "I would be like that". Thus would it help us keep our eyes fixed on our goal.

It is in this context that I would offer St Joseph as a fitting image for the monk. The Rule of St Benedict makes it clear that obedience to God's commands is a cardinal virtue for the monk. "It is by this way of obedience that we go to God," Benedict teaches (RB 71:2). Our practice of obedience in the monastery should school us in the Lord's service (RB P:45) that we might be ready to fulfil the injunction: "If you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts" (RB P:10). Our life of obedience — to one another, to the abbot and to the Rule (cf. RB 72) — and especially in difficult or impossible things (cf. RB 68; 7:35ff), should turn us into righteous men, those who through their habitual practice of obedience (cf. RB 7:68-69) are ready to obey God's command — even if it is a hard thing, into those

worthy of entering the kingdom of heaven (cf. RB P:49-50). Joseph was such a man. We could do worse than to use the image of Joseph, the righteous man, as portrayed in today's Gospel, as a reminder of our call and destination.