

St Joseph
(2 Samuel 7:4-5.12-14.16 / Matthew 1:16.18-21.24)
19.03.2021

It is well-known that the present Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis, who was Jesuit novice-master in time past in Argentina, has great admiration for and devotion to St Joseph. He keeps an image on St Joseph on his desk – an image which depicts the saint sleeping. I remember a former Jesuit novice-master in France telling me that St Joseph is regarded as something of a model for Jesuit novice-masters. I presume that this is due to the way in which Joseph incarnated discretion in the ministry confided to him when he was called upon to act as *foster father* to Jesus. Joseph respected God's will and action in the One he was asked to care for. This should be the attitude of every spiritual guide. Just like every earthly father, Joseph undoubtedly contributed to his education, including Jesus' religious formation. Joseph would have helped Jesus as a boy and as a young man when he watched over watch over Him to arrive at a deeper understanding of His true identity – both as a human being as the unique Son of God. All true spiritual fathers – as, indeed, all natural fathers who are imbued with a spiritual sense, will see this to be central to their mission in life. They will appreciate that they are called to lead those confided to their care to recognise God to be their Heavenly Father, in whose service they should live their lives. I am sure that on the day when Mary and Joseph found the Boy Jesus in the temple after they had been searching for Him frantically for three days must have been greatly comforted to hear their twelve year old son declare that during the time He was missing He had to be about His Father's business. They must have been interiorly proud of their education of Jesus – despite the sorrow they would have felt at the boy Jesus' loss and even a degree of annoyance with Him for having gone missing without alerting them to His whereabouts – when they heard Him explain Himself. I suspect that as a father Joseph would have felt deep joy in his heart to hear Jesus say that He knew that He was called to be about the work of God – His Father's business. This would have confirmed Joseph that he had fulfilled his mission as the boy's earthly father. Joseph would have seen that he had helped his Son realise that He was first and foremost God's Child. Joseph would have found consolation in hearing the boy Jesus confirm by His words that He had come to understand His full identity as *Son of Man, Son of God*. What parent, who has sought to bring up a son or daughter in the faith, would not rejoice to witness the fact that their child has come to realise for him or her self the implications of living their life in the Lord, being engaged in the work of God, committed to serving God, accomplishing the Lord's will, doing whatever it is God bids them to do?

We meet Joseph in today's Gospel passage where we meet him so often in the unfolding of the Good News stories related to him: asleep! Isn't it quite extraordinary that the one given to the Church as her Universal Patron is a slumbering saint? We might ask ourselves just what this might have to say to us. I think this is a question worth asking. I believe there is a profound significance to the fact that we meet Joseph sleeping... asleep, but encountering God as he slumbered. In the various *sleeps* of Joseph recorded for us in the Gospel story we are told that as he slept he dreamt of angels... and, as he dreamt of angels, he discerned in what they had to say God's message for him.

Perhaps the first thing that Joseph's sleeping moments have to say to us is something that can console us. It is that Joseph never actually saw God in a manner that was as clear as day! He saw angels in his dreams: not God. If Joseph heard God speak it was only through the intermediary of angels. In other words, Joseph didn't receive directly dictated messages from the Lord. He saw God *only dimly*, as it were. Joseph was given to understand what the Lord was asking of him only through other created creatures. Remember, like human beings, the

angels are created creatures. Saying that, I find myself thinking of a phrase we find in the writings of Paul (in 1 Corinthians 13:12) in which the apostle expresses the fact that here on earth *none of us sees God clearly, but only through a glass darkly*, or, as that verse is sometimes rendered, *we see only through a mirror dimly*... that's to say, in somewhat obscure ways. St Joseph also only heard God's words in indirect ways. He was obliged to discern what was relayed to him by the means of his visions in the night and the words he recalled from his dreams. Here too is a consoling thought for us. Joseph heard God speak essentially *in the night* – we could say, in the quietest of ways and in moments of darkness. The nights in which Joseph heard God speak to him were not just physical nights; they were also nights of incertitude. God spoke to Joseph at times when he was under pressure, at times when he was threatened.

Let us consider the four dreams recorded for us in the Gospel story.

In the first dream, in which Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy, the *just man* had gone to bed greatly troubled, much perplexed. It appears that his heart was held in the grips of fear. Why else would the angel of the Lord have begun by telling him not to be afraid? In that dream, Joseph was instructed to rise above his fears, to move beyond his own reticence and anxieties, in order to do what the Lord wanted him to do. He heard this instruction from God: *Take Mary home as your wife*.

In the next dream, Joseph was given a warning to leave Bethlehem, where Mary had given birth to the child Jesus. The angel ordered Joseph to *take flight into Egypt, to find refuge there*, because the Infant-Christ's life was in danger in Judea. Once again, the ambiance was not a comfortable one. Here too we can imagine that fear and disquiet were in the air. Joseph would have been troubled once more.

The third dream recorded for us came to Joseph when he was in Egypt. It was less threatening, but unsettling in another way – quite literally un-settling. Joseph was asked to *up sticks*, as we say, and take to the road again. Joseph was told to return to Israel. This instruction would have Joseph head back to the unknown. We can imagine that the young husband of Mary and guardian of the Child-Jesus would have sensed a certain risk involved in this course of action – for himself, for Mary and for the Child – even though there was no great foreboding contained in the angel's revelation to him at this point. To the contrary, even!

Joseph had a fourth and final dream – at least a fourth and final dream recorded for us in the Gospel account. (He may have had other dreams which are unknown to us, because they were not recorded in the Gospels.) In this last dream Joseph was once more alerted to danger. As a result of the angel's forewarning, he travelled with the Child and His mother to Galilee, instead of going back to Judea from which the little family had left for Egypt.

All in all, while Joseph was visited by God often, none of those visits occurred at the most comfortable of moments in his existence. There was always a certain insecurity in the air when God spoke to him. Joseph's comfort was to come to him in dreams... which, as I said earlier, were always a matter of *seeing through a glass darkly*. There was always a certain obscurity when it came to God's ways in Joseph's life. This can be – and most often is – the case when it comes to our lives too. God does not send us emails; He does not distribute detailed instruction books to us; He does not offer us operational manuals by which to live our lives; He does not supply clear roadmaps. The Lord speaks to us surely, but in ways that we have to decipher and try to understand... ways that lead us to proceed in faith and act without any firm guarantee that we are, in fact, doing exactly the right thing.

While it is no doubt important to consider Joseph's life for what it can teach us, what I esteem to be really essential today is that we grasp what this *just man* has to say to us about acting in and living out of faith. It is also extremely important that we take on board what Joseph has

to illustrate for us in regard to listening attentively to God's voice. Joseph shows us that the way in which we are given to hear God's voice will be most often through intermediaries... and that as we listen we will find that we are called to engage ourselves to move forward... accepting that frequently this will lead us to advance just step by step, progressing along the way somewhat hesitantly, because our walk with God will see us journeying in the night!

Joseph, the discreet, low-profile saint did not do much to attract attention during his lifetime. He made no great declarations. We do not possess even one recorded word spoken by Joseph in the Gospels. Clearly, this man was animated by a very discreet spirit. Discretion, the shunning of attention... these attitudes marked Joseph's whole way of being even before he received the angel's visit in his initial dream. We are told from the outset that *Joseph wanted to avoid publicity*. Remember how he wanted to spare his betrothed publicity around her pregnancy, so as to safeguard Mary's life and that of the child she carried in her womb. It seems to me fair to conclude that Joseph constantly deflected attention away from himself. He certainly never played centre-stage – even though he was all important in the unfolding of the Christian story... and even at the heart of things in Matthew's Infancy Narrative!

I am pretty sure that Joseph would want us, who keep his memory today, to look not just at his life, but beyond it, to discern in it what might inspire us for our lives. Joseph would want us to grasp that at the very heart of his experience of God was the same call addressed to everyone of us: the call to live in faithful, humble service. I think Joseph would want us to appreciate what he came to understand in the unfolding of his life. Namely, that God can and does speak, but not with a loud voice. Joseph would want us to perceive that God does not make His will known to any of us by clear dictates. Joseph would also want us to understand what life taught him: that God speaks to us most of all in the heart of the night. That's to say, that the Lord speaks to us at times when our defences are down; at times when we are not in control; at times when we are passive, as it were... and even vulnerable – vulnerable in the positive sense... as vulnerable as we are when we allow another's love to touch us intimately. God speaks to us especially when we are quiet, for only then can we truly listen. God acts best when we do not put ourselves in a position that gets in His way. Moreover, I am sure Joseph would want us to hear (indeed, experience) what he did: God's reassurances at those times when we most need them... at those times when things are asked of us which seem to be beyond us... so much so, that we can hardly understand what it is that the Lord asks us to do and how He would have us go about doing what He asks of us. Just as Joseph distinguished himself in the Gospels by his silence, I suspect he would want to teach us to be quiet and listen; to be silent in order to listen. If you and I are to hear what the Lord God has to say to us, then we need to quieten ourselves, to be still so that the Lord can act, stirring us into action in the way He wants to. Just as Joseph heard the call not to be afraid, so we also need to hear that call. We need to learn to become less agitated, less caught up in our own affairs and preoccupations, so that, like the boy Jesus, at twelve years of age, we can *be about the Father's business*... the Heavenly Father's business. That fundamental lesson that Joseph would have retained from the boy Jesus (like Mary, pondering those words in his heart too) is one you and I need to hear for our lives today and every day. We need to grasp that what really matters is that we do God's work as it is revealed to us. Joseph did just that all his life. To have seen that his Son had learned from him that what matters in life is the Heavenly *Father's business* is, I believe, the saint's greatest laurel and most profound joy. Joseph witnessed that the boy Jesus had come to realise that He was the Son of God. Isn't that wonderful? Awesome! As Christians we are all *the children of God*. As Church – as members of the Church – we are all called to *do whatever the Lord asks of us*. We are called to live as Jesus did: doing the Father's will always. In John's Gospel we hear Him say: *I do only what*

My Father bids me to do. May each one of us be strengthened in a sense of our particular calling. May we realise that our vocation is to do, what my late mother would have called simply, *God's holy will.*