

ADVENT MIDWEEK 3

Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph: A Christian Father

We don't hear a lot about Joseph in the Bible. He's more often behind the scenes than in them, and even when he's in them, he's not in the spotlight. He was Mary's husband. He was a carpenter. Other than that, he was just Jesus' earthly father. And that speaks volumes, because when a Christian father is at his best, the scenes aren't about him, but are about those in his care and devoted to God's glory.

We live at a time when families are struggling to remain families, or to discover what it even means to be families. And this isn't only a problem for those outside the church. Sometimes those within the church even shamefully outpace their unbelieving neighbors in this regard. God says, "***I hate divorce,***" in Malachi 2:16, and yet many Christians are tempted hire a lawyer sooner than put in the hard work to fix what God says are not grounds for divorce. Children rebel. Parents forsake their parental duties. Schools strain to fill the gap. Pastors strain to teach at least the basics of the Catechism intended to be taught by the heads of households, but neglected by them instead. And while this isn't necessarily new in the history of the church, it is surely disheartening and cause for concern.

St. Paul writes to the Ephesians in chapter 5:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

And just in case anyone would want to dismiss Paul's words as an anomaly in Scripture, as his own opinion and not God's will, St. Peter speaks in the same way in the third chapter of his first letter.

Ladies, I will leave it to you to consider how you have fared with respect to these words of God for your marriages and lives, whether you have loved your husbands and submitted to them as the Church does Christ. Today, as we look at Joseph, I would instead especially like to focus on what God expects of Christian men, especially in marriage and the family. And ladies, you can listen—indeed you should—but fight the temptation to climb on your high horses, because we wouldn't want you to get too scuffed up when the time comes to focus upon God's admonitions for you in Scripture and you wind up knock you back off it.

In our Holy Gospel, Joseph walked into an extraordinary situation. His fiancé was pregnant, and it wasn't his child. There was no doubt about that, because he hadn't yet known her in that way, because they weren't yet married. And so, when he found out about her pregnancy, he had a predictable response. "***And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.***" To his credit, it seems he was going to do it in a compassionate way, to avoid bringing Mary undo shame or possible punishment. He was a just man, Matthew says, as his caring plan, even when he was surely deeply wounded, shows.

Yet then something changed. Joseph found out that the baby wasn't his own, which was no surprise, but rather that the Child was God's own Son, which surely was a surprise. The angel reported, "***Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.***" And what do we hear next of Joseph? "***When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.***"

It wasn't about Joseph. It was about God's will for Joseph and, after that, what was best for his wife and for Jesus, God's Son in Joseph's earthly care. Family came first. We see that clearly as Joseph traveled with Mary to Bethlehem and was by her side as she cared for a newborn in less than desirable conditions, no place for them in the inn. And when his family was in danger, Joseph didn't hesitate to pick up and move them to Egypt, to give up the life he had built so far for their safety. When the danger had passed, Joseph once again moved back to Nazareth, starting again from scratch, and from the silence about Joseph after that, it seems pretty evident that he there labored for the remainder of his days faithfully though without fanfare to support them. Of course, Joseph was surely not without sin. Like all of us he was a sinner. But he also clearly knew where a sinner goes for forgiveness, because in the few times we see Joseph in the Gospels, we see him in the Temple twice, for Jesus' presentation and for the Feast when Jesus was twelve. While we don't get all the details, Joseph clearly took his vocation as a husband and father seriously and to heart.

On a side note, as we consider the vocation of father and husband, Luther has some great words here to say to those men who might think helping around the house beneath them, or women's work:

Now you tell me, when a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool—though that father is acting in the spirit just described and in Christian faith—my dear fellow you tell me, which of the two is most keenly ridiculing the other? God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling—not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith. Those who sneer at him and see only the task but not the faith are ridiculing God with all his creatures, as the biggest fool on earth. Indeed, they are only ridiculing themselves; with all their cleverness they are nothing but devil's fools. (*Luther's Works*, vol. 45, p. 40)

When God's Son was born, what did God the Father use to provide for, protect, and raise Him, but the family, and especially Joseph, a Christian father? If God thought the Christian household worthy of such a responsibility, how can we not consider it a great responsibility, honor, and gift of God to be part of a Christian family or to support the Christian family?

Christian men, be Christian men. It's not about you. It's about Christ and those He's put in your care. Find forgiveness in the Child reared by Joseph and encouragement and instruction as Christian men in His Word. As you do so, remember that you are called to love your wives with that same love you find there, the compassion and commitment with which Christ loved the Church. Christian headship in the household is nothing without humility. Christ did not consider it beneath Him to serve, yes, to sacrifice His own well-being and life, for His bride, the Church. As Christian men, God forbid we ever consider the same beneath us and think of ourselves more highly than Christ.

Christian women, don't discourage or derail your husbands or other Christian men in this venture. Lift them up with prayer, with your words and actions, and don't neglect God's will for Christian women.

Christian children, Christ was obedient to His parents. He wanted to please them and make their job easier. Be obedient to your parents. Love them. Forgive their faults. Try to make their work as Mom and Dad easier and a joy.

Single Christians, if you are hoping to marry someday, take this time to prepare, to learn what to look for in a spouse and how to deal with the challenges marriage brings. If you're not necessarily planning to marry, be sure nonetheless to support and encourage Christian families through sincere prayers, helpful deeds and thoughtful encouragement. When you see a couple struggling, or a family on the rocks, offer what aid you are able in order to ease their burden and foster domestic peace.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, fathers and husbands, wives and mothers, single people, and children, devote yourselves to the Christian family and to the cultivation of Christian men. While the work of the Christian family may seem insignificant in the eyes of the world or the selfish sinful flesh, it is a calling and a creation of God of the greatest importance, because when the Christian family is neglected, everything else can't help but fall apart. In Christ, God has given you His family, and made you His family. Let us, like Joseph, in turn do the same for God as well. Amen