

Today's liturgy focuses our attention on the mystery of the Incarnation, the birth of God's Son, Jesus, into human history a little over two thousand years ago. St. Paul in the second reading reminds us of Jesus' dual nature, divine and human. Today's first reading from the prophet Isaiah has traditionally been applied to the person of Mary his mother. In the gospel we have Matthew's account of the angel's (Gabriel? He remains unnamed) annunciation to Joseph in a dream about God's plan of salvation through Mary his betrothed wife whose pregnancy has occurred outside the normal human course as a direct intervention by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, in turn, is invited to faith in the message and to his role in salvation history by serving as the earthly husband of Mary and the foster-father of Jesus. For St. Matthew, in contrast to St. Luke, it is Joseph who is the hero of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus.

The Joseph of the Christmas story is clearly reminiscent of the Joseph of the Exodus story; he too has a dream, he too goes to Egypt, and he too saves the family. But after the flight into Egypt with Mary and the child Jesus to escape the murderous Herod (clearly drawn as a counterpart of the Egyptian Pharaoh who had similarly ordered the massacre of young Jewish male children) the Joseph of the Christmas story writes his own history. And he "writes" from silence. While there are a few phrases uttered by Mary in the gospels, no word of Joseph is recorded. He is presented to us as an "upright" man, a designation scholars say implies that he conformed himself to the Law of God, the supreme Jewish standard of holiness.

Joseph's holiness was not some type of spiritual gymnastics: prolonged fastings producing a wane complexion; hours of pious religious devotions; walking around with downcast eyes. No, Joseph's holiness (and I believe his on-going relevance for us) was that he models for us holiness in the commitments and demands of everyday life: his faithfulness to Mary, their marriage; his commitment day-in-and-day-out in providing for the physical needs of Mary and Jesus. In the culture of the Bible in his day it would

have been Joseph who took Jesus to the local synagogue for Sabbath worship and instruction since women were not allowed inside. It would have been Joseph who taught Jesus the laws and rituals of the Jewish tradition. (Today the Church rightly notes that it is the responsibility of both parents of children to provide for their faith formation, at the same time studies have consistently shown that for boys the faith practice [or non-practice] of their father is a strong indicator of the strength or lack of the faith and commitment sons will have when they, in turn, become adults and fathers.)

Finally, while Joseph shows all of us, men or women, how a person can be a pious believer, deeply faithful to everything within religious tradition, faithful in daily commitments to spouse, children and the necessities of providing for family life, the true greatness of Joseph is that he shows us how be open to a mystery beyond both human and religious understanding. What does one do when God breaks into one's life in new and previously unimaginable ways? When God invites me to be stretched beyond my "comfort zones" human and religious? How does one deal with an impossible conception: for Joseph a child to be born of Mary his wife with no participation on his part; for anyone of us the invitation to a deeper, more mature, more personal, more demanding, relationship and presence of God in daily life?

The answer, I believe, is found in the last sentence of today's gospel: "When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him" (Mt. 1:24).

St. Joseph, husband of Mary, foster-father of Jesus, teaches us the value of faithfulness in the commitments of our life. Teach us the courage to say "yes" to the mystery of God when called as you were. As you protected and guided Jesus, your divine-human son, guide the Church he brought into being through his death and resurrection and the breathing of the Holy Spirit. When our life's work is done, usher us with you into the eternal joys of the heavenly kingdom to the same Jesus whom you served. Amen.