

ST. JOSEPH: A SAINT FOR OUR TIME

It is hard to believe that we are now ten months into the pandemic and, as we celebrated Christmas last year, who would have thought that Christmas this year would have been so different. And yet it is so. I am sure that many of us continue to reflect on what the last ten months has changed for us, but, hopefully, also what these months have taught us, or can teach us. At the same time, I am sure that we are also thinking of the future and what 2021 and the “new normal” will be like.

As we opened the many Christmas cards from friends and relatives, we saw once again the various scenes and characters that we associate with Christmas: the new-born Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, angels, the three wise men etc. Yes, they are so familiar, but perhaps we also can see them with new or fresh eyes this year. With this in mind, we can reflect on how one of our characters, dear St. Joseph, might help us, inspire us and guide us in our thoughts, reflections and resolutions. As we look at St. Joseph, he can act as a mirror to help us look at ourselves: who am I, what are my values, what is really important in my life, how can I make a difference, how can I not only cope with difficulties, but even grow in and through them?

Indeed, you may know, Pope Francis has declared a “Year of St. Joseph” that runs from 8th December 2020 to 8th December 2021. As Pope Francis has observed, St. Joseph can be a saint who is a special help and guide in the ongoing pandemic and in our times of difficulty. The Pope noted that: “each of us can discover in Joseph – the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence – an intercessor, a support and a guide in times of trouble.” So, let us explore together and be inspired by this wonderful saint...

We hear about St. Joseph a number of times in the Scriptures. He is described as a *just man* or a “man of honor”. The word “justice” really means a right or proper relation with God and others. We see this sense of justice as Joseph wished to do the right thing when Mary is discovered to be with child. Instead of wanting to expose her to public shame or worse still, he wished to protect her. We too are called to be just and to be people of integrity; always saying or doing the right thing, especially in difficult times.

He is also a man of *humility and faith*. He did what the Lord asked him to do many, many times; in taking Mary into his house as his wife, in escaping King Herod and going into exile in Egypt, and in naming the child “Jesus” as he had been told to, (even though it was his right as head of the household to choose a name). So, what is the Lord asking of me...how will I know...will I do it?

He was therefore a man of *action, courage and obedience* in doing what he was asked to do. He faced up to tough decisions and choices, such as taking Mary into his home, or in that escape into Egypt as we mentioned above. He also made those decisions in obedience to God’s will. As St. John Chrysostom says, “the best sort of obedience is not to start searching for reasons for doing what God asks us to do, but simply to do it.” Let us pray then for courage; that we will both know and then do God’s will, even if it is difficult or upsets our plans.

At the same time, he was a man of *prayer and contemplation*: when faced with these tough choices and decisions, he reflected and prayed. How else would he have listened and then heard what God wanted him to do with his life and with Mary and Jesus who had been placed in his care? In his inaugural homily, Pope Francis put all this beautifully: “how does Joseph respond to his calling to be the protector of Mary, Jesus and the Church? By being constantly attentive to God, open to the signs of God’s presence and receptive to God’s plan, and not simply to his own.” May we be the same.

We can imagine that prayer also gave him *strength* in all his trials and tribulations. There was the desperate search to find a place for Mary to have her child. He had to flee as a refugee with his family to a foreign land and then had to rebuild his business and connections from scratch as he and the family returned to their country, to live in Nazareth. Later on, he and Mary searched for the lost twelve-year old Jesus in Jerusalem. Without prayer how would he have coped...? May we too be people of prayer, especially in times of adversity.

His vocation was to be the “custos”: the guardian of Jesus, a husband and protector to Mary and to support the family with his job. In other words, St. Joseph teaches us how God can be found so often in the *everyday things* of life: in a job, in our family, or in a friend. We might say that the extraordinary often comes in the ordinary and that our sanctification so often occurs in the events and people of daily life. Saint John Paul II notes that St. Joseph is “proof that in order to be a good and genuine follower of Christ, there is no need for great things: it is enough to have the common, simple and human virtues, but they need to be true and authentic.”

Saint Bernadine of Siena tells us that “God entrusted his most precious treasures to St. Joseph.” We too have been entrusted by God with many treasures as guardians and stewards: our children, our spouse, our friends, or the earth and its resources, or those who suffer or who are in need, or many spiritual treasures such as the Mass and the sacraments and indeed our very body and soul. Let us imitate St. Joseph in being good, true and just guardians and stewards of the many gifts and treasures that God has given to us

St. Theresa of Avila had a great devotion to St. Joseph and would frequently ask for his assistance. She would often say that our Lord always listens to the voice of his earthly father and guardian. As we begin the journey of 2021, St. Joseph can be a great help and inspiration to us all. He journeyed well through tough times: let us pray for each other with St. Joseph’s intercession, that we may do the same!

Fr. Anthony M. Barratt, Christmas 2020