

A Man after God's Own Heart

In the name of him who is called Jesus because he saves his people from their sins, dear friends in Christ: “Most highly favored Lady” – yes indeed. That’s a lovely hymn [LW #356]; I’m glad they included it in our newest hymnal. It tells the story of the Annunciation: when the Virgin Mary first hears that she is to become the mother of the Christ. It tells of her commendable response of faith: “Let it be to me according to your word.” And it includes a portion of her Spirit inspired prophecy in what’s known as the Magnificat, Mary’s song of praise, that henceforth all generations will call her blessed. And so we do: not just in this hymn, but in many others. As a matter of fact, I went through the Christmas hymns and carols in our hymnal and found a specific reference to the Virgin mother in over half of them. Others speak of angels and shepherds, of the Father giving his Son, and of the words of the prophets being fulfilled. All kinds of people are sung about in connection with the birth of Jesus. But there’s one person who played a key role in the Nativity of our Lord who is never mentioned, not even once (at least, I couldn’t find any – and I would be happy to be proven wrong). I speak of Joseph, Mary’s husband, the guardian and adopted father of Jesus, who is often the forgotten member of the Holy Family.

And that really is a pity because, like I said, he plays a key role – actually several of them – but first and most obviously by being the man God chose to raise his son: to defend him, to provide for him and the family, to be his primary spiritual leader and guide in his youth, to be his role model, to teach him a trade, and to train him how to be man. These are important tasks, and I don’t imagine the Lord turned them over to Joseph lightly. Just as Mary was chosen for her humility and willingness to serve, it’s safe to say that Joseph was chosen for certain qualities the Lord knew he possessed. Mind you, this does not negate God’s grace. Neither Mary nor Joseph were anything in and of themselves. They were sinners just like you and me. If they possessed and displayed outstanding virtues, it’s because God gave them to them – which means he can give them also to us. In fact, he desires to do so. And with that in mind, I’d like to examine a little more carefully the godly character of Joseph and see what we can learn from his example.

But first it needs to be said that to a certain extent it had to be Joseph whom the Lord chose. Why? It’s because he was the legitimate successor to King David’s throne. I rather doubt that he was aware of it, though. By the time Joseph was born there hadn’t been reigning heir of David for well over 500 years. So, while it’s certain that Joseph knew that he had royal blood coursing through his veins, it’s doubtful that he knew that if the kingdom were still in place, he’d be the guy on the throne. There was simply no way to keep track of it. You know how in royal families in which the kingship is passed down only through the male lines, sometimes a line will die out and there will be no male heir. Then you have to go back up the family tree to find the first king who had a younger brother, and then run down his line of descendants to figure out who should be king. It’s complicated. And after 500 years with no kingdom and no one keeping record of such things, I mean, who would know?

The point is the Lord knew. One thing’s for certain: he plays by the rules. That he chose Joseph is proof that *this particular* descendant of David was the legitimate heir to the throne of Israel. And that’s important because so many prophecies that God gave point to the truth that the Christ would be a descendant of David and the legal successor to his throne. So, follow me here: just as Jesus got his human flesh and blood exclusively from his mother Mary, so he got

his kingship and right to rule from his legal father, Joseph ... which might make one wonder, was Mary chosen first? Or did the Lord choose Mary because Joseph chose her and got himself engaged to her? Hmmmm ... It's likely a case in which the answer is "Yes. Both are true."

But back to Joseph: It was said of David, his forefather, that he was a man after God's own heart. And we see this reflected in so many of the psalms he wrote and in some (but certainly not *all*) of the things he did. But if David was a man after God's heart, then I think it's accurate to say that Joseph was even more so. Let me explain:

Try to put yourself in his place. You're a hardworking young Jewish man living in Nazareth. You're religiously devout. You've got a good reputation. You come from a good family. You were raised right. And now you've come to that point in your life when it's time to start a family of your own. No problem there. You've long had your heart set on a lovely young lady from down the street. She too comes from a respectable family. You've practically grown up together, though, as was the custom in those days, you are a few years older than she is. Still, through furtive glances, sweet smiles, and the occasional conversation, you've come to understand that she's as smitten with you as you are with her. You want to be for her a good husband. You want to spend your life filling hers with joy.

And so you proceed with your plans, doing all the proper things you're expected to. Courtship among Jews in the first century was rather involved – and it involved the whole family—both of them: parents on both sides, all the siblings, and the grandparents too if there were still around. And all was done with strict propriety and supervision, every effort being made above all to preserve the young maiden's honor. Never was the couple allowed to be alone together, not even for a moment.

But then came the day when you formalized the arrangement. You became officially and publically engaged. And let me say this: the primary purpose of the engagement period, which would last between six months and a year, was for the groom (and everyone else) to ensure that he wasn't marrying a woman who was already pregnant and that her assent to the marriage wasn't just a way to cover up some indiscretion on her part with some other fellow.

Of course, being Joseph, you're not worried about that. You know what kind of girl Mary is: respectable, honorable, dependable, faithful; you've got no doubts about her. No, this is a mere formality to endure as you eagerly wait for the happy day of your wedding, when you and Mary will come together at last and begin your life as one before God and all the world. And oh, how you long for the day, completely convinced that Mary is just as committed, eager, and happy about it as you are.

And then you find out that she's with child, and your plans, your hopes, and your dreams for the future all collapse into dust. You're heartbroken. Devastated. You feel betrayed. You've been deceived, lied to. While you've been so carefully keeping everything strictly chaste and pure, she's been out playing the whore ... with who knows who? Or how many? And the personal pain is only part of it; there's also the public humiliation. It may be a bit hard for us to understand because we are immersed in a society that has lost all sense of propriety, but in a very patriarchal culture like theirs was the worse insult you can hurl at a man is that he's attached to a woman who's unfaithful and he didn't know it. Yes, henceforth Mary will be known as easy, a silly girl who allowed herself to be compromised by some sweet-talking slick; but Joseph will be forever branded the fool.

So, here you are: heart sick, crushed in spirit, disgraced, humiliated, back-stabbed; and there is one person you can point to and say, “She did this to me.” You would expect anger, the desire for revenge, a way to hurt her like she hurt me. And Joseph could do it. He could publically denounce her. The penalty for adultery was death; but since the Romans had taken from the Jews the authority to inflict capital punishment, they would do the next best thing: that is they would treat Mary as if she were dead. Thus she’d be unclean. No one could speak to her or have her in their home. She’d be driven out of town in shame. And by so doing – by showing a little righteous indignation – Joseph might even regain a little of his own standing. But no, and this is where we see the heart of God in Joseph. His initial response is not to get even, but to show mercy. We’re told that Joseph was a just man, that is to say he was righteous before God. It doesn’t mean he was sinless. It means he trusted in the mercy of God who forgives sin through sacrifice. And because he lived by trusting in God’s mercy, his first inclination was to be merciful. Despite his pain and humiliation, he resolves to divorce Mary privately. This won’t spare her reputation exactly, she’s still pregnant – can’t hide that for long; but it would make it possible for her to stay with her family, and who knows, maybe go someplace else where people weren’t aware of all the particulars and she could claim to be a widow or something. She’d have a chance for a more or less normal life.

Having made this decision, Joseph settles down to sleep in peace. It’s then that he’s given what must have been a very startling and vivid dream – it would have to be to convince him that it was true. Let’s face it: the news would be pretty hard to believe. But somehow Joseph knew it wasn’t just the wishful thinking of his subconscious mind, but an actual message from God Almighty delivered by a holy angel. Don’t fear to take Mary, your wife. The Lord is now fulfilling his Word. The Virgin has conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and he will be God with us. And you, Joseph, shall call his name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

As we heard, Joseph did what the Lord asked of him. He took Mary as his wife – and so doing, we see in Joseph yet another aspect of the heart of God. What do I mean? Just this: in the eyes of community, Mary is guilty. Sorry, but none of the neighbors is going to buy the virgin conception story. I doubt very seriously that the couple would waste their breath trying to explain it. But when Joseph steps forward and takes her as wife in her delicate condition, the natural assumption of the community would be that he is the one who got her that way. Again, it was a very patriarchal society. The men were in charge. They were responsible. Women did what they were told. So, when Joseph goes ahead and takes Mary as wife, the net effect is to exonerate her in the court of public opinion and put the blame squarely on his shoulders. Say it another way, before the world, anyway, Joseph saves Mary from her sin by taking the guilt on himself.

Thus Joseph does in a very small and I guess you could say “artificial” way, since there was no real guilt involved, what the Child to be born of Mary would do on the grandest scale imaginable. Jesus, God’s Son born of a Virgin, comes to take a wife, the one we call the Christian Church. She – and each and every one of her members – is born in sin and steeped in it. She practices it continuously. And by all her practice, she’s got pretty good at it: infidelity that is, in every way possible. She’s not just guilty in the eyes of the world; she’s guilty in the eyes of God. And for it she deserves to be put to death forever, cast into the flames of hell.

But Jesus is not afraid or ashamed to take her as wife. He unites himself to her, becomes one with her – so that the righteousness which is his becomes hers and the guilt that is hers becomes his. He then takes that guilt to cross, where he pays for it, suffering the torments and the death she deserved. And then he rises again to take her again, to cleanse

her, to restore honor and purity to her, and to be one with her forever. He lives up to his name, the name Joseph gave him, Jesus, “The Lord Saves”, because he saves his people from their sin.

And he gives them a new heart, a heart like Joseph’s – after God’s own – which is faithful, devout, and inclined toward mercy because it has received mercy, which forgives because it has been forgiven, and which is willing to suffer abuse and shame in order to cover the sins of others. That’s the kind of heart the Lord wants to give you.

So today, as we come to the end of the penitential season of Advent, let us search our own hearts to determine what in there doesn’t measure up: what anger and resentment we hold toward others who have wronged us, our desires to extract revenge upon those who have caused us pain or loss, to see them humiliated and exposed to disgrace – to see justice done, as it were – and to condemn them according to a standard that we ourselves can never attain. Let’s confess these evils, cast them out, and thus prepare ourselves to receive again the One who comes to save us from our sins and give to us a heart after God’s own. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!