

## SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

DECEMBER 31, 2023

### LESSONS FROM ST. JOSEPH

St. Joseph tends to get overlooked in the Christmas story. He seems to be less noticed by us and less spoken about. Perhaps lost in the crowd of angels, shepherds, wisemen, camels and sheep... But he is a very important part of the story of Christ's coming. And today, the Sunday after Christmas, is his special day on our Orthodox calendar.

He is very important in the story and very important to us as an example. What can we learn from St. Joseph? First, a glance at what we know about him. He is a descendant of the great King David who lived about 1000 years before Joseph. He lived in the town of Nazareth in Galilee. He was a carpenter. No age is given in the gospels for him but there is a strong tradition that he was much older than St. Mary---and there are some little hints about that in the gospels. Some of our hymns refer to him as "the old man Joseph". Probably not as old as me! More likely middle-aged, but compared to the Theotokos who is commonly thought to have been about 15 at the time she gave birth to the Lord-----that's pretty old!

Most of the Church Fathers that speak about this say that he was a widower with several children from his first wife. So those children of his, such as St. James and St. Jude, would have been older step-brothers of Jesus and step-children of the Blessed Virgin. And again, there are hints in the gospels that seem to show this.

St. Joseph must have died before Jesus began His public ministry at age 30 (which we will celebrate this week on January 6 on Theophany/Epiphany). He was still in the picture when Jesus was 12 as he took him to the temple in Jerusalem. But it seems obvious he was gone from this world when Jesus began to travel and preach at age 30.

So those are some bare facts about the great man. What else do we know about him? ***And what lessons can we learn from his example?***

**#1**---He was a forgiving man. At first, it was hard for him to believe that a virgin conception had taken place in St. Mary's womb. He knew enough biology to doubt that story and he knew he was not the father----so his conclusion was that there was another man, that his fiancé had been unfaithful to him. Of course, he was deeply hurt and concluded it would be best to break off the betrothal.

According to common practice, he could have greatly hurt the young Virgin Mary by how he ? it off. Most of the time in situations like this, it was announced publicly and great public shame would fall on the woman. And it could ruin her life! What man would wish to later marry a fallen woman?--- But Joseph decided not to do it that way. He did think breaking

up was necessary, but he decided not to hurt the woman he loved. He would rise above the harsh standards and customs of the time and break it off quietly, as privately as possible, to cause his fiancée as little harm as possible. As we read in Matthew 1: 18b-19—“she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.”

Joseph forgave, by responding in this way, what seemed to be a very serious sin. He did not seek revenge. Forgiveness was Joseph’s way.

Unfortunately, that is not the way of many! Maybe not always our way, either! Instead of forgiving, perhaps we resent and hold grudges and maybe even retaliate when someone does us wrong.

There is a story about a parish council meeting at a church where there was a very heated disagreement about some issue. It devolved into yelling and finger pointing over a big difference of opinion between the priest and some council members on one side, and a group of other council members on the other side. Then, a few days after the meeting, the priest became seriously ill and was hospitalized. He received a “get-well” card from the council. In it, there was a note from the secretary of the parish council that read---“Father, we had another council meeting after you were hospitalized. A motion was made that we should mail you a get-well card. The vote on the motion was as follows: There were seven votes for you to get well. There were five votes that you stay sick. And there were two abstentions.” (Dangers, Toils, & Snares, Eilig, Galli, and Ortberg, Multnomah Press, p. 5)

How different those folks were than Joseph! Actually, there was nothing to forgive as his fiancée was innocent of sin. But he didn’t know that at first. Joseph thought she was very guilty, indeed. And he forgave her and planned to protect her. When someone hurts us, let us, with the help of the Lord, follow the carpenter’s example.....and forgive!

**#2—St. Joseph believed in what God said even when it was hard to believe. God sent an angel to let Joseph know that St. Mary was innocent, that it was indeed a miraculous virgin conception! What an incredible miracle----a conception not involving a man, but of the Holy Spirit! And what a big step of faith was needed by Joseph---and he took that step and believed and stayed with the Blessed Virgin and dedicated his life to protecting her and her child.**

Sure, sometimes he had doubts and struggles about it all, but he always kept believing what the angel told him. Some versions of the Christmas icon (including the huge new one on our south wall) show the Virgin Mary, after the baby is born, looking not at the baby but over at St. Joseph. Joseph is shown being tempted by the devil, who took on the appearance of an old man. He is being tempted to think that the new baby is the son of some other man; that there had been no miraculous conception. St. Mary looks at him with love because she is praying for him to stay faithful. We know how strong her prayers are! Joseph stayed faithful and believing!

In Blackpool, England there is an unusual tourist attraction. It is a 385 foot high tower with an elevator that takes you to the top. At the top, there is attached a large clear glass platform that overhangs the ground far, far below. The glass is very thick and very strong and very safe. And it also very clear----when you stand on it and look down, it is just like you are floating on air. Some people just can't handle it----they take a few steps, glance down, and hurry off! Others trust the builders to have done a good job. And they spend time "floating on air". They have faith that it is safe! ("Our Daily Bread", 8/24/99)

Holy Joseph had enough faith to "step out on the glass", to live the rest of his life believing that the miraculous story of Jesus' arrival in our world was true. God said to Joseph---"Walk on the glass." Joseph had faith and obeyed and walked on the glass. He believed God and the angel, not Satan. And he stayed on the glass the rest of his life.

God asks each one of us to live our lives based on belief in Him. Having faith is your way of walking on the glass. Follow St. Joseph's example---and enjoy the view!

**#3**—Joseph faithfully did the work God asked him to do. It was very important work---to protect the mother and child. In particular, to protect them from the evil King Herod. To do so meant total disruption of Joseph's life. He had to leave behind his home, his friend, and his profession to move to Egypt and safety until things calmed down. He did it because that was what God asked.

And another immensely important task given to him by God---to be the step-father of the Son of God---to give a good and holy upbringing to the Messiah. What an amazing task to be asked by God to undertake. Joseph accepted, and faithfully carried out the work God asked.

Perhaps you have work to do for God---in fact, I know you do. Maybe it's quiet work. Something like Joseph's---not getting special recognition, maybe not even a "thank you." Don't quit---instead follow the example of St. Joseph. Keep working quietly for God. He will one day reward you when you stand before His judgment throne. And Christ will thank you as He thanked the righteous in His preview, in Matthew 25, of the final Judgement Day.

Today is St. Joseph Day. Let each of us strive to follow his example in three ways----by forgiving, by faith in what God tells us, by faithfully and humbly working for God. These three things are not easy. And when it gets hard, whisper a little request to St. Joseph to pray for you. For he is not dead. Even now, he is before God in heaven....and there he prays to the Lord, his step-son. So why not have him include you in his intercessory prayers to the Lord. Ask him to pray for you---God will let him hear you! And Joseph will pray for you.