

Homily121816

HOW MUCH DO WE REALLY KNOW ABOUT JOSEPH?

(We know that Mary was betrothed to a man named Joseph of the House of David. He hailed from Bethlehem. What else do we know?)

“Mine.” “Give me that; that’s mine!” Mine is a funny word. We use it a lot and often without thinking too much about it. “That’s my car over there.” “Would you bring me my curling iron?” “That’s my daughter doing those floor exercises.” “Have you met my boy? He’s a straight A student.” “Have you met my spouse?” Sometimes mine depicts ownership but sometimes it is less than possession. I surely don’t “own” my spouse but in some sense there is this very personal connection with the particular person I have exchanged vows with. And it is proper to say, “He is my spouse.”

Mary of Nazareth was betrothed to Joseph of Nazareth way back in the first century AD. As the gospel of Matthew says, “After Mary and Joseph were betrothed but before they lived together.” So Mary and Joseph were engaged but they didn’t live together. Is that simply a fact that is being presented to us in this Scripture passage or is there something more going on? A teaching perhaps. Something prescriptive even. There is a difference between being engaged and being married. And it has to do with whether or not the couple lives together. In our culture most young couples choose to live together before marriage. Including most young Catholic couples. They do not see anything wrong or immoral about living together before marriage. It almost seems logical and commonsensical to move in before marriage. But Joseph didn’t and Mary didn’t. Perhaps there is something more going on than what first meets the eye.

When Joseph decides to divorce Mary quietly because she is suddenly pregnant and he knows that he is not the father, is it because he doesn’t believe her? Or because he does? I think most people think that he just doesn’t believe what Mary told him. After all, when has it ever been that a woman becomes pregnant after being “overshadowed” by the Spirit of God? How likely? So the thinking is that Joseph cares about her but feels she has been untrue and just wants to cut his losses. But what if that isn’t what he thinks at all? What if he believes everything she told him? And he wants out precisely because he DOES believe her? What if he is totally sure that she did have such an experience and God did overshadow her? Could it be that Joseph, who saw Mary as his, (My fiancée, my betrothed, my future wife) suddenly realizes that God has moved into the picture in a big way and a very real way. Joseph realizes he is no match for the Almighty God. “Look Lord, I will definitely back off. If you have something special you want of Mary and that means she can no longer be my spouse, then I bow to your will in this Lord. She doesn’t have to be my betrothed.”

Joseph is a just man, a man of simple faith. I think he believed her and I think he saw no future role in her life once the Lord moved into this kind of life-giving and intimate relationship with her. Joseph’s dream is what breaks through to a deeper realization. Yes, God is doing something in Mary and the child to be born will be son of the Most High God but Joseph is still to take her and the child into his home. He is to give her a place to live and his protection and he is designated as the one to give the child the name Jesus. But Joseph was correct in stepping back from the relationship. He sensed innately that once Mary had had this experience of the living God that their (Joseph’s with Mary) relationship would never be the same. Now when he says that Mary as his spouse he does not use the word “my” as he ever would have used it before. Mary was never Joseph’s spouse the way most men and women are spouse to each other.

But here’s the question in my own heart. Is it not in some sense true that the child Jesus is the issue of their marriage—by God’s design, even though Joseph isn’t the father? Isn’t it true that their virginal and chaste relationship is actually fruitful in ways beyond our capacity to grasp initially? And—might it not also be true that a chaste and virginal relationship is actually possible between a man and a woman? With wonderful and lasting and fruitful results? Our culture, since the sexual revolution of the early 1970’s has sold us all a bill of goods which is really a lie. We were all told that every relationship has to be sexualized to be real or true or fruitful. Not so. Not so between a man and a woman and not so between persons of the

same sex. There is a friendship that is of God and very possible, that is not a sexualized friendship that our society has lost all sight of. But it exists. It has always existed and it has been made possible by the grace of God. Not only is such friendship possible, it is desirable and worthy—and better, in some ways, than the sexualized relationship between men and women. But who is even paying attention to such things in our world? We hear this passage from Scripture with knowing ears. We know what it is all about, we think to ourselves. Do we? Do we really? How much time have we actually spent reflecting on this short passage in our hearts? How long at all?

God is always teaching us, always putting before us that which will help us. Are we even paying attention? Do we ever think that God might be speaking to us at a deep level in and through the regular Scripture readings of a given Sunday? My friends, I know this much. God is always trying to get through to me. When I believe that and when I spend time with Him and give Him the opportunity invariably he gets through to me. There is a week til Christmas. Give the Lord some time this week. Let Him reveal to you the gift He desires you to have. This friendship is real—and very, very fruitful.