

Evensong Homily – first of St Joseph 2023

Tonight we are celebrating the feast of St Joseph, the spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Joseph was Mary's husband, Jesus' guardian and adopted father.

The family into which Jesus, God made human, God among us, was born was not a traditional, nuclear family. It does not conform to the ideals of 21st century Western society, but rather reflects God's plan to save humanity.

So this seems a good moment to briefly reflect on families, on how God's loving presence can be discovered in all domestic life, and in many household configurations.

Following this theme, three things strike me about St Joseph. I want to put these under some bold headings: (i) chastity, (ii) adoption, and (iii) masculinity.

First, chastity. Not a word much in vogue, and conjuring images of self-repression and excessive restraint. But the Christian tradition has claimed for most its history that Mary and Joseph never had sex. Their other children, Jesus brothers and sisters in the Gospels, are by tradition Joseph's children of a previous marriage.

Joseph is revered by Catholic Christians as "the most chaste spouse" of the Blessed Virgin. While Jesus' conception involves only Mary's consent and the power of the Holy Spirit, the marriage of Joseph and Mary is one of care, love and intimacy but *not* reproduction. In an ancient culture where children were very important, economically and spiritually, this is a queer story.

So, as a model for heterosexual couples marrying and having children, Mary and Joseph are not at all straightforward. Rather they represent the strangeness of God's ways.

But Joseph's chastity is not simply his refraining from marital relations, which was (again according to tradition) convenient for him as an older man. No, chastity runs deeper than that. It is his use of his bodily presence to protect Mary and Jesus and care for them.

His life is used not for his own gain in romance or pleasure, good as these are, but rather entirely for Mary's good. This kind of love does not negate bodily intimacy but points towards its true end: the creation of a permanent loving union between people.

All Christians, gay and straight, married and single are called to the virtue of chastity. Chastity means seeing other people as ends in themselves and not means to our benefit. Joseph, the most chaste spouse, shows us what this might mean.

If we're married or partnered, maybe it means living in a way which puts our spouse's needs first, a spiritual commitment to this way of life extending to all the areas of our lives including time, money and bodily intimacy. If we are single, maybe the way that we use our time and energy, which are our body's gift, to help others and not for selfish gain.

Second, adoption. The central claim of the New Testament is that we are God's adopted children. We have been accepted, by love and grace, as first-born sons and daughters of God. This sounds familiar to us but it's a very radical claim. These people, these sinners, these nobodies, not of high rank or wealth, claim to be God's sons, as did emperors and dictators!

So maybe it's no surprise that adoptive parenthood is at the root of Jesus' own story.

It matters that Joseph adopts Jesus and Mary as his own, that there is a gap between the biology, the legalities and the choice he makes to love them as a father.

Joseph is an example of what it means to take others' into our homes, our families our lives. He shows us what grace can do not just in the families we are *born into* but also God's movement in the families we choose, our end up in by chance.

Thus, Joseph is a model for step-mums and step-dads, fostering and adoptive parents, but also for all guardians and carers, godparents, religious orders in orphanages, people who move in together for comfort and solace, care homes, student houseshares . . . The list could go on. But the point is that the chosen love is as important as the blood.

The Gospel creates a new kinship, based on the power of God to make people anew. For anyone whose biological family story involves pain, abuse or estrangement this is very good news indeed.

Finally, masculinity. Toxic masculinity is still with us, taking ever-more virulent forms on social media. A way of being "male" that involves egocentric self-assertion, materialism and violence.

I often think that God kept us men out of Jesus' conception to humble us. So often men think they are the main characters in the world's story, but in the Gospel God chose the women and children, Mary and Jesus, to be centre stage.

St Joseph chooses humility at every point, not breaking off his betrothal to Mary, placing a protective cover over her earthly life at his own cost, playing his part in *her* story, and that of her blessed Son, time and time again. He is there not boast about himself, but to gently make possible the events that will lead to Jesus' ministry among us.

And we really only get snippets, in canonical Scripture. Joseph's humility eventually proceeds to total anonymity! He disappears from the Gospel without any word about his death, and by the time we get to Holy Week he is long gone, presumed to have died. Joseph, we can imagine, in the anonymity of Galilee, taught Jesus the skills of life, of which there is now no historical trace.

And this is his greatest gift, especially to men. Joseph offers a way of life which is about nurturing others, a masculinity which is about empowering women and children, not dominating or controlling them. A life poured out for the good of those we care for, leaving only a memory and legacy of love.

St Joseph, most humble man, gentle father of Our Lord, most chaste spouse of Mary, pray for us to God. Amen.