

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Mar 19th 2013

The Feast of St. Joseph, Patron of the Universal Church

In today's liturgical celebration we step apart from the intensifying climb toward Calvary in Holy Week next week and pause in the light and joy of the Solemnity of St. Joseph, Patron of the Universal Church. How appropriate it is that at this time of change of leadership in the Church we turn to Joseph, the man who gave Jesus his human fathering experience, and ask him to care for the Church as he cared for and protected Jesus in his childhood and adolescence.

By Tradition, Joseph is called a builder. The first reading plays on this notion with the text from Isaiah which is a prophecy given to King David that his Son would build the temple, but the meaning of the text "It is he who shall build a house for my name" has many implications. Even in the original prophetic context it went beyond the mere building of a Temple to "house" Yahweh, rather the implication is for a dynasty or family from whom would come an eternal King. We Christians claim this as fulfilled in Jesus, but it is also true that from the family of David would come a builder for God's house – and Joseph too, is of that lineage and the Church looks to him as both patron and caretaker of the Church.

Just as Christ did not mean for Francis of Assisi to simply physically restore the little building of the Church at San Damiano, when he asked Francis in a vision to "rebuild my Church," but rather Christ was calling Francis to restore the hearts of the faithful to faith – to rebuild the Church – that is the Temple made up of living stones of Baptized believers. This was in the 12th Century when there were many scandals and problems that undermined the core mission of the Church to bring all women and men to Christ.

In the 20th Century, Vatican II asserted in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church that the Church's mission, the mission of all the baptized is to be holy – with the holiness of God. But how are we to be holy? It belongs to God alone to be holy.

Holiness is discovered in obedience to the will of God evident in the virtue of Faith. But, the Constitution reminds us, the Church is *semper reformanda* – always in need of reformation because its members are often faithless, disobedient to the desires of God. Faith is the first of the theological virtues (direct gifts of God) given to us in through the Holy Spirit in Baptism, that make it possible to respond to God with the obedience of Jesus. Faith is the foundation for holiness lived out by practicing Love.

Today's second reading from Paul's letter to the Romans reminds us that Abraham is called our "father" because of his great faith. Abraham is a "type" of the builder that Joseph would be for Christianity. A man who obeyed the command of God received in a dream – even though he did not understand what it was that God was asking. (No more than Abraham did when asked to sacrifice his son.) Both of the Gospel texts which are offered today as options for our Banquet of the Word, invite us to see Joseph as faithful to God's will made present in Christ. He is shown to have built his family life on Faith in God.

Joseph's faith, similar to Abraham makes him the "father" of the Church, the guardian and protector, the witness to genuine human implementation of obedience to God's will. Joseph's fatherhood is not based on physical seed, but on the "seed of faith." I feel challenged today to ask St. Joseph to intercede with his Apprentice/son, and the Spirit, to rebuild our Church – to restore the wisdom and the holiness of faith to all members of the Christian Community throughout the world. On this cusp of a new Pontificate in our Church which needs serious spiritual carpentry work, my own prayer will be that God sends us St. Joseph to show the new Holy Father, and all of us, the tools we need and how to use them effectively, to build up God's Kingdom on earth.

[This reflection was written before the election of Pope Francis last week.]

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