

## **'TRUST AND OBEY': 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT A**

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A priest said to a group of men on retreat, all of them fathers of children: *'If you want a model of a good man, and a good father, don't look past Joseph.'* One of the fathers challenged him there and then: *'Joseph's situation was totally different from my situation. He was a saint, his wife was sinless, and his child was the Son of God. I'm no saint, my wife is not sinless, and my child isn't the Son of God.'* The retreat priest replied: *'Was your wife pregnant before your marriage and you didn't know by whom? Did your son leave home for three days and you didn't know where he was? With problems like those, are you and Joseph really that different?'*

The relationships in Matthew's story today are bewildering to Western people like us. First Mary is said to be *betrothed* to Joseph; then Joseph is said to be planning to quietly *divorce* Mary; and later she is called his *wife*. These details reflect the Jewish marriage customs of the time, in which there were three steps to getting married: -

First there was the *engagement*. This was often made when the couple were only children. They became engaged through agreement between the parents of each, or through a professional match-maker.

Later, there was the *betrothal*. It was the endorsement of the engagement by the couple, and it lasted one year. At this point the engagement could be broken if the girl was unwilling to marry the man. But once they were betrothed, it was absolutely binding. During the year of betrothal, the couple were known as husband and wife, but they did not live together, nor exercise the rights of man and wife. Betrothal could be broken only by the formality of divorce. Mary and Joseph had reached this stage of betrothal, and so if Joseph wanted to end the relationship he had to divorce Mary.

The third and final stage was *the marriage proper*. At the end of the year of betrothal, the man went to the house of the bride, and took her in a festive procession to his own house.

If we remember these customs we will make more sense of what Matthew tells us today.

When Joseph discovered that the woman to whom he was betrothed was pregnant, and since he knew that he was not the father, he would have been devastated. But distressed and disturbed though he surely was, he did not act like the typical male of that time and have her stoned to death. No! He loved Mary too much to let her be hurt or shamed in any way. So he decided to end the relationship as quietly and privately as possible.

He had made up his mind to do this, when in an amazing way God intervened. A messenger of God spoke to him in a dream, and revealed to him that the child which Mary was carrying had no human father but was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. So the messenger said in effect: *'You, Joseph, must take Mary to your home as your wife. You must adopt the baby as your own son, and so make him a descendant of King David like yourself. Moreover, as his foster father, you are to give the baby his name. You will call him "Jesus," a name which means "God saves," because he is to liberate people from their sins and from their sinfulness.'*

A lesser man than Joseph would have objected at this stage, and having objected would have walked away. But not this Joseph! He was no ordinary Joe. He made his response there and then in two ways that can be summed up in two words. The first is TRUST. The second is OBEY. Joseph would trust God, and he would obey God, fully and faithfully. He would trust that with the impending birth of this special child, God was indeed with us, and he would do all he could to cooperate with God and the plans of God. So the Preface for the Feast of St Joseph says of him:

*For this just man was given by you [God] as spouse to the Virgin Mother of God and set as a wise and faithful servant in charge of your household, to watch like a father over your Only Begotten Son, who was conceived by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, Our Lord Jesus Christ.*

TRUST and OBEY. Actually there's an old hymn that has that very title. Perhaps you know it. Anyway, this is how it came to be. More than a hundred years ago in Massachusetts USA a young man was very moved by the powerful preaching of a preacher-man called Dwight Moody. In a burst of enthusiasm he jumped to his feet and starting talking. It soon became clear that he did not know much Christian doctrine. But he finished his enthusiastic endorsement of the preacher's words by saying: *'I'm not quite*

*sure about things, but I'm going to trust [God], and I'm going to obey'. The preacher was so struck by the young man's response that he got those words put to music.*

If you want to hear all the words and music, just 'google' into your computer: 'Hymn "Trust and Obey".' Meanwhile let me conclude with just its first verse and the hymn's refrain:

*When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word,  
What a glory He sheds on our way!  
While we do His good will, He abides with us still,  
And with all who will trust and obey.*

Refrain

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way  
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*