

4th Sunday of Advent 2010

Fr. Bob VerEecke, S.J.

I wonder as I wander how many of you have ever taken the time to look closely at this Joseph altar? It is beautifully carved and depicts the scenes of the birth of Jesus. Joseph is a man on the move. Moving from Nazareth to Bethlehem, back to Nazareth, down to Egypt, back to Nazareth. He always seems to be moving. Lots of movement, interior and exterior, inside and out, but Joseph doesn't say a word in the scriptures. But then again, actions speak louder than words.

What if you received a Christmas card whose image was this: a young woman with tears streaming down her face, reaching out to a young man whose pained expression you can see but whose back is turned to her. And written on the card was "A blessed Christmas." You'd probably think: what, this must be some kind of a joke? This isn't Christmas. Christmas is angels and shepherds and stars and pretty pictures. Well that's not what we heard today in Matthew's gospel. This is how the birth of Jesus came about. When Mary and Joseph were betrothed but before they lived together, Mary was found to be with child and Joseph had to decide to divorce her, send her away or have her stoned. We can so easily forget that the Christmas story begins with a scandal (a stumbling block.) This is not a pretty story. It's about human pain, disappointment, confusion, even possible violence. The story of the gospels begins with a scandal and ends with the scandal of the Cross.

Actions speak louder than words. If you have seen or if you will see my choreography in "Christmas Reflections" for Joseph, you will see how I try to portray the pain and anguish that Joseph feels as he faces the unexpected news of Mary's expected child. I wish the dancer who plays Joseph so powerfully were here this morning to move for you. What you would see would be someone pulled in different directions, toward and away from Mary. You would see him twist and turn in confusion, kick the ground a few times, bend low as if he was carrying the weight of the world, or a cross. Then you would see him fall asleep from exhaustion. And in that sleep God's messenger, an angel appears and takes his hand and in his dream he dances with this angel who supports him as he falls and gives him the strength to trust and take the risk of believing that this is God's handiwork.

I wonder if those of you who are struggling in this season of comfort and joy with personal issues, disappointments, painful situations can receive some guidance from Joseph whose life was thrown into turmoil for a while. Can Joseph be a model of guidance, of trust and risk-taking for you?

There is a new book on Mary that has just been published, it is stunningly beautiful. It by Judith Dupre and it is called "Full of Grace." The text and images are simply breathtaking. Of the many chapters, there is only one on Joseph. He plays an important role in the story of Christmas but as the author says, we need to use our imagination to think of what it must have been like for him to take the risk of believing. And so I want to offer this prayer for your reflection. I'm sure you'll recognize it with a few new twists and turns.

Greetings Joseph
Full of Grace
The Lord is with thee
Blessed are you among human kind
And blessed is the fruit of your labors for Mary and Jesus
Holy Joseph
Care-filled father
Pray for us,
That we may trust as you did
Now and at the hour of our death
Amen.