

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermo preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2016

+

Saint Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus is the *other* story. It is "other" than the one we know by heart, which is Saint Luke's account. St Luke has Caesar Augustus, and those beautiful phrases, "when all the world should be taxed" and shepherds "abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." When you had a speaking role in the school Christmas pageant you had to practice the name of the governor of Syria. Was it "Cyrenius" or "Quirinius?" It depended upon the translation used. But you can thank St Luke for all that!

When we think of Christmas the vision we have of Bethlehem is based upon St Luke. Saint Francis of Assisi modeled his devotional inspiration of the Christmas crèche upon Luke's account of the nativity. After all, it is St Luke who describes a stable, a Child in the straw, His mother Mary, and the shepherds. Perhaps your own nativity set layout includes some cattle, a star, and angels. And when you set it up you have to decide where to place Saint Joseph! Sometimes his figure is even confused with the shepherds! In St Luke's account of Christmas the Blessed Virgin and her Child are at center stage. But in the "other" account, St Matthew's, *Joseph* is the central figure.

You remember that at the Annunciation (also recorded by St Luke) it is *Our Lady* whose momentary hesitation held up the Incarnation of God. In St Matthew's Gospel everything is all set except for Joseph! He has to be brought on board. The Incarnation also had to wait for *Joseph*.

Almost everything we know about Saint Joseph comes from the accounts of Christ's infancy. But from these few lines we gain a great and favorable impression of the foster-father of Our Lord. We are told Joseph had considered divorcing Mary but then decided to "sleep on it." How often that is a good idea for us as well! Before the e-mail era, with its instantaneous "send" click of the mouse, a wise office secretary, after taking a blistering letter in dictation, typing it up and getting it signed and sealed, would place it overnight in her top desk drawer. The next morning when the boss asked if she had mailed the letter the secretary would say, "Oh, I forgot." And then the boss would say something about not sending it. "Let's rewrite the letter!" In the Christmas gospel we are told Joseph "slept on it." We know that God's angel slipped into Joseph's quiet time and gave counsel and

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermo preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2016

+

advice. When Joseph awoke, he had the faith, humility, and resolve to be obedient to what he may not have understood but knew was the Lord's will. Not knowing the Lord's will in any given matter is perplexing to say the least. But knowing in advance that the Lord's will, whatever it may be, *overrules his own will*, was part of Joseph's soul. That is part of his greatness.

When we are obedient to Almighty God, even with the right approach of humility, we are still not given the clear divine plan. Learn from the Christmas story. More than once the Bible's record of salvation history tells us of the Lord's Mother that she "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." In today's gospel St Joseph does the same. He was "flying on instruments" (which for him was the angel) because, left to his own resources, Joseph was like a pilot who could not see ahead clearly. For us it is often a matter of wondering if we really must follow the discipline of the Church when everything around us says the Church is out of step with the times. The rubber hits the road when the priest's advice runs counter to what I really want to do.

In his gut St Joseph wanted to divorce Mary quietly. To his everlasting glory he recognized the angel's authority to overrule! Our Lady would no doubt have preferred the safety of home life in Nazareth to what happened after Gabriel's visit. But thank God she also said, "Be it unto me, according to thy word." And the rest, as they say, is history. But this is not *just history*. It is salvation history. And salvation history takes a step forward when souls are obedient to the will of God.

When you look into the Christmas manger scene, do not see Joseph as one of the optional pieces of the set you ordered for a little more money! The scene we call Christmas is the mighty intervention of Almighty God become Incarnate. It came also because *two* people, Mary and Joseph, chose to trust in God despite the inconvenience and confusion. Christmas was an act of divine love and human courage. The Gospel bids us show the same trust and response to God's will for us. The Scriptures always tell us that when we do, good things, which is to say *God's things*, will come of it.