

4th Sunday of Advent (A)

22nd December 2013

'Joseph — husband, craftsman, patron of dying'

Is 7: the maiden is with child ... Ps 23:

Rom 1: *Jesus Christ our Lord, ... in the order of the spirit, ... Son of God*

Mt 1:18–25: Joseph takes Mary to his home.

2013 comes towards its end, and it has been a year of some challenges, for many, and losses and hardships for others. And into this extraordinary year we have had the surprising change of Pope: the courageous, rare, decision of Pope Benedict to abdicate, and the election of Pope Francis. The Pope's election has brought new attention to St Francis of Assisi. But, additionally, Pope Francis has also emphasized St Joseph. His inaugural Mass took place on St Joseph's Day, 19th March, and he drew attention to St Joseph's role as protector: protector of Mary, of Jesus, ... of the Church. And then he agreed an initiative begun by Pope Benedict, to insert St Joseph's name into every one of the Eucharistic Prayers. It's good to be reminded of the supreme importance of St Joseph.

And here we are, on the brink of Christmas, reminded in the Gospel of the supreme importance of St Joseph. Of course we know that the key to Our Lord's incarnation is Our Lady: Mary's acceptance of her role as mother of the divine Son. But all the same, she needed alongside the extraordinary figure of

Joseph, a robust and saintly husband. St Matthew's account of the Gospel is written, as it were, from his perspective: we see his dilemmas over the baby that Mary carries, which is not his ... and yet, at God's word, mirroring Our Lady's own trust and faith, he takes her to his home: he accepts the child as if it were his own; he names the child the sacred name, "Jesus" — "the one who saves." Matthew portrays Joseph, then, as very human, but thoroughly faithful. Without his faith and courage, Mary would not have been protected at this, or any other stage through the dangerous events that surrounded the birth of Jesus. Many sinful forces were at work, jealousies that would have happily eliminated the Messiah in his infancy. It was Joseph who saw to it that the Holy Family was protected and saved.

In the first instance, then, St Joseph appears as a patron saint, and example, of Christian husbands and fathers. Before any concern of his own, he places the mother and child. In the sight of God, he fulfils that God-given vocation of husband. 2013 has also been a year in which, tragically, our Parliament has voted to sweep away the Christian (and, for that matter the Jewish and Muslim ... indeed the *simply human*) notion of marriage, i.e. between a man and a woman. But here, as a bolster to the truth, stands Joseph and Mary: the God-given unit

of a couple, providing a home for the infant ... child ... adult ... God made man. It's so important for our society that husbands fulfil their great role of loving, faithfulness to the wife; that as fathers they are attentive to the spiritual needs of their children. There is nothing more important in being a father than to make sure that your children are given a good example of loving God, of praying, of coming to Mass, of worshipping Jesus as Lord. Just as Joseph did. A model husband and father, a model Christian man, and how dearly we need such a role model, to show that the Christian man is a real man! So often our faith is caricatured as some sort of a wimp's religion, a pathetic limping-on of an outdated tradition, as something not very manly. How very wrong! How wrong, when compared to the virile example of saintly heroism of St Joseph, or indeed many of the Church's saints down the ages. Men of courage, strength and zeal, who carried the living Gospel with conviction in the face of incredible odds.

St Joseph is also the patron saint of workers, especially of craftsmen — he reminds us that our daily life and our work is an important dimension of life as God has given it to us. In that work of carpentry, we believe Jesus also would have been involved. We should learn from Joseph, then, to bring our faith

to bear also on our daily working lives. Is anything we do or say at work — the way we behave, the way we speak, the way we treat others — at odds with our faith: immoral or unjust or sinful? Let's pray to St Joseph to help make our working environment a place which is sanctified, a place where our faith is not denied or hidden.

Finally, St Joseph is the patron saint of the dying. Imagining him to have been accompanied at his death by Jesus and Mary, we invoke him also as a saint powerful to protect us at our own deaths. As we come towards the end of another year, let us also ask this great saint, husband and protector to watch over us at our end, and keep us away from anything that would harm us or damage our faith ... that we like Him may be close at our death to our Blessed Lord and His mother.

St Joseph! — pray for our Christmases this week, for the husbands and fathers of our parish, that their faith may be strong, and their example be always faithful to God's will. May this Sunday's Gospel give us that great reminder that the Catholic faith is a great calling, a work demanding commitment and real strength of character. May the men of our parish live up to this great and holy task, and commit their hearts to leading their families to the Lord.