

Dear friends,

Are you ready for Christmas? During Christmas we think about Mary, we sing of the angels and shepherds. Poor Joseph hardly gets a mention. He is left on the sidelines. Well, not this advent season. The Gospel story centers on Joseph.

I don't know if you have ever wondered about this, but I have always asked this question. Why was Joseph chosen to be the foster father of the Son of God? There were so many qualified people in his time- well educated and well known, than this carpenter. God the Father, in whom all fatherhood finds its roots, saw in him qualities that others probably don't see and wanted him to teach his son how to be a man — a man of God — according to his humanity. What are those qualities?

Talk about divine communication? His betrothed wife is with child with the Holy Spirit and he is the last to know, and when he learns, it is not his child. Because God deliberately delays his communication, we get to know the inner workings of Joseph better - his inner thoughts and feelings. One of the most beautiful expressions of character in the bible for me is described right here. "Not wanting to put her to shame, he decided to divorce her quietly." How many of us will think in this way when faced with similar situations?

Joseph, Scripture says, was a righteous man. The Hebrew word for a righteous man is tsaddîyq. Joseph was a tsaddîyq, and this means he was known for his uncompromising obedience to the Torah, the Law of Moses. He followed the law, even the minutest ones. Joseph didn't eat unclean food. He didn't mix with the wrong kinds of people. He didn't keep his carpentry shop open on the Sabbath to make a few extra drachmas. He was a tsaddîyq; that was his identity. Everybody knew this about Joseph.

But now he's a tsaddîyq with a problem. The girl he has promised to marry is going to have a baby, and whoever the father is, Joseph knows it's not him. The Torah has some clear instructions about what to do to somebody in Mary's condition. A section in Deuteronomy 22 covers marriage violation. If a woman pledged to be married is unfaithful, it says: "She shall be brought to the door of her father's house, and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge this evil from among you." The Torah was clear. Joseph's reputation as a tsaddîyq was on the line.

Being a righteous man, Joseph must have agonized over this day after day-

***Struggle between what he thought a tsaddiyq ought to do, and his longing to show compassion to this young girl and her child. A struggle between what the Law required him to do and what in his heart, really wanted to do.***

Joseph steps outside the Law and came to a conclusion. He has decided not to expose his betrothed to shame: "Not wanting to expose her to shame, not wanting to judge or condemn her, he decided to send her away quietly."

Is it possible that in getting his world turned upside down, in having to struggle between what he thought a tsaddîyq—a righteous man—ought to do, and his longing to show compassion to this young girl, maybe Joseph was being prepared by God to come to a new understanding of what righteousness is?

Is it possible there's uncertainty in your life that God is allowing to take place so that you will come to a new era of spiritual growth? Maybe right now- a moment of conflict between what you should do as per the laws of the Church or what your faith tells you and what you really want to do in love and compassion? Do not dismiss these thoughts. They are grace-filled moments. Take your time. Pray, talk to your spiritual advisor. Maybe, God will lead you to a better understanding of faith and righteousness. That is what you mean by owning your faith.

Is it possible God is allowing some uncertainty in the Church, so that we as a Church will come to a new era of spiritual growth? In the Church right now? A few weeks ago, I wrote about discussions over the document “Amoris Laetitia” (Joy of Love)- which addresses the problem that remarried couples face in fully participating in the Church’s liturgy. The archbishop of Dublin recently stated, “There are some in the Church who are unsettled by the ability of the Pope to place himself in the midst of the uncertainties of people’s lives.” I want to emphasize that Church leaders are beginning to comprehend what our Holy Father is asking us to do. The archbishop said, “Marriages begin with a dream. Marriages hit difficult times. Marriages fail. Marriages begin anew. The Pope stresses the role of the Church in accompanying men and women on the journey of married life and family life, even when the initial dreams begin to fade or indeed fail.” The phrase that I love in this document is- “No one should be condemned forever.” I want to say, no body who sits in our Church, right here at CTK should feel they are condemned for ever, that they have no hope.

Let me come back to Scripture. In the Gospel of St. John 1:17 we read, “Law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.” It is a powerful statement. John later expounds his statement. Jesus is seated with his disciples and he is teaching them. The scribes and Pharisees parade an adulterous woman in front of him.. They ask him, “This woman has been caught in the very act of adultery. As per Mosaic Law the woman should be stoned to death. What say you?” Jesus “bent down and started writing on the ground with his finger.” He is in deep thought- verbalizing his inner sentiments. What would my father do in this situation? I am talking about Joseph. The scribes and the Pharisees want to condemn the woman using the Law of Moses, but God in Jesus steps outside the Law and wants to embrace the woman with Grace. Let the one among you without sin be the first to throw the stone.” Jesus states, “Has no one condemned you? Neither do I? I don’t condemn you. I don’t judge you. Go sin no more.”

Condemning other, judging others and exposing people’s weaknesses and shame are the major sins of the so-called righteous today. It is a painful reality of the day that whenever someone attempts to be Joseph-like in our day and age— “Not wanting to put someone to shame- not wanting to judge another, not wanting to condemn another or not wanting to

make someone feel uncomfortable or unwelcome- there are people who may frown upon.” But Joseph has a message for us – It is the Christmas Spirit!