

Feast of St. Joseph, celebrated March 18, 2023

Reflection by Sr. Michaela

— St. Joseph —

To what kind of person does God entrust his most precious treasures? Today we celebrate God's answer to that question. The young man, Joseph, is a silent witness to the answer. We have no recorded words from Joseph. Actions speak louder than words.

The year of betrothal had begun for Mary and Joseph, a contract so serious that as the time approached for the public wedding, if the couple changed their minds or something caused the wedding to be called off, only a divorce could cancel the contract. It was during their betrothal year that an angel came to Mary with a question for her, the answer to which would change the entire future of the world one way or another. Joseph knew that the woman to whom he was betrothed was a woman of strong character and faith. It is clear from the time he spent agonizing over what to do about the situation of her pregnancy that he loved her deeply. Matthew tells us Joseph was a "just man", his concern for others exceeded only by his love for and obedience to God. Joseph makes a painful, up-setting choice. He would quietly divorce Mary.

Once the bitter decision is made, Joseph can sleep once more, and that night the angel conveys God's Annunciation to Joseph, "Do not fear". In his own faithful answer Joseph takes Mary into his home. During this time Joseph must have honed his skills in the art of reconciliation, admitting his struggles over his confusion in what to do about her pregnancy and perhaps with his own family's accusations of impurity and sin on their part or finger pointing at Mary with suspicion and conjecture. Barely settled in their simple house together, perhaps Mary teasing him about using his skills as a carpenter to decorate his bachelor quarters to include her, a decree from the distant Roman emperor brought another unsettling and unforeseen difficulty into the beginnings of their life together. Without care for the difficulties and hardships he would be causing, Ceasar Augustus demanded that people return to their places of origin to be enrolled for

the taxes he wished to levy. A good citizen of his country, Joseph wanted no difficulties to arise between his people and their Roman conquerors, and so he and Mary began to ready themselves for a long, difficult Journey during the last weeks of Mary's pregnancy. There are many artist's renditions of Joseph leading a donkey toward the south, Mary riding the small animal, but there is no mention of a donkey in the scriptures. The tools of his trade, food, blankets, water and necessities of the trip south would easily have been what the donkey (if there was one) would have carried. Travelers would have walked. In Bethlehem there was no room in the Inn. Joseph's resourcefulness and the good will of the Innkeeper secured a place for the young wife to deliver her baby.

Angels continued to visit Joseph in his dreams, and like the Joseph of old, he acted quickly on their prompts. "Arise, get to Egypt," "Go back", "Leave Judeah," and despite the long journies, the struggle to provide for his family in strange places and as they travel, Joseph remains God's selected man of all seasons. During the early life of Jesus, Joseph taught, first by example, showing his young son how to keep the precepts of his culture, offering sacrifice at the important religious festivals, helping the boy Jesus to love and respect God's written Word.

He loved the little troublemaker he has been asked to protect and that love supported this extraordinary, ordinary man as he and Mary nurtured in Jesus the values from which both parents had created the pathway of their own lives – honesty, integrity, faithfulness and obedience to God. Strict himself in observance of Jewish law and custom, Joseph was ready to make these subservient to the greater law of the Spirit, perhaps a lesson learned in his struggle to be just toward Mary in their betrothal year.

Joseph loved Mary and worked with her to create a home of support, trust and shared love for Jesus and each other. All three experienced living lessons together, as Lyn Jarrell mused about when considering the flawed trip to Jerusalem for the Passover, when Jesus was 12.

As a carpenter Joseph taught Jesus his trade and the boy, as he grew, learned about building household furniture, doors, windows, staircases and bannisters, how to shape carts and wagons, yokes for oxen, masts and decking for boats, how to

repair it all. He would learn to remodel buildings, and carve oars for fishing boats. Joseph would have taught the skills and techniques of working with wood, stone and plaster, how to measure and plan a project. He would have helped Jesus to take pride in good workmanship, proper care for his tools and place of business and, most importantly, how to maintain good relationships with suppliers, how to charge fairly for his work and treat his customers with dignity and respect. Jesus was probably a terrific carpenter in his maturity, when he was head of the household.

The Church's tradition is that Joseph died before the public ministry of Jesus began, but we do not know. His death, with Mary and Jesus beside him, must have been a blessed one. Consistent with his quiet and humble nature Joseph would probably hope that we know very little of the details of his life and focus on Jesus instead. What we do know is that he was a man of great compassion, faith, courage, endurance, resourcefulness, love, self-sacrifice and patience. He was one who understood the need for reconciliation, honesty, loyalty and prayer in his life. He knew how to wait, listen and tend to the details of life in the places where God led him. He was provider and protector. Above all, he fulfilled the great trust given to him by God—an everyday man well suited to help raise the Word of God made Flesh.