

Best Supporting Role

Luke 1:26-38

2nd Sunday in Advent

4th December 2011

A Jewish comedian tells the story about a lady named Mrs. Steinberg who, many years ago, was stranded late one night at a fashionable resort on Cape Cod – one that, in these times, did not admit Jews. When the desk clerk heard the woman's name, he looked down at his book and said, "Sorry, madam, no room. The hotel is full." The Jewish lady said, "But your sign says that you have vacancies." The desk clerk stammered and then said curtly, "I am sorry but it is our policy not to admit Jews. Now if you will kindly try the other side of town, maybe you will find somewhere there."

Mrs. Steinberg stiffened noticeably and said, "I'll have you know I converted to your religion. I am proud to be a Christian." The desk clerk said, "Oh, yeah, let me give you a little test. How was Jesus born?" Mrs. Steinberg replied, "He was born to a virgin named Mary in a little town called Bethlehem." "Very good," replied the hotel clerk. "But can you tell me exactly where in Bethlehem he was born?" Mrs. Steinberg replied, "He was born in a manger." "That's right," said the hotel clerk. "But I'll bet you don't know why was he born in a manger." "Oh, yes, I do," said Mrs. Steinberg loudly, "He was born in a manger because an idiot hotel manager like you wouldn't give a Jewish lady a room for the night!"¹

I wonder if you have ever noticed that, whenever these kind of humorous Christmas stories are told, they nearly always feature Mary but hardly ever Joseph. Comedians have as difficult a time making jokes about him as they do about, say, Joachim Sauer, husband of German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Sauer is a very distinguished man in his own right, a brilliant quantum chemist and eminent university professor. But he never figures in humorous anecdotes or stories like his wife, not because he might be lacking a sense of humour or can't handle being the butt of comedians' jokes, but simply because not enough is known about him. He maintains a very low profile, standing in the shadows. Keeping out of the limelight to the point of seeming invisible. In fact, he has been so lacking in public presence in recent years that the German press has nicknamed him "Phantom of the Opera".²

And it's the same in the Biblical Christmas narratives. There also Joseph seems to be somewhat invisible. He is simply consigned to a minor walk-on part. A cameo appearance. He plays a supporting role as a man who stands in the wings of the Nativity drama while the spotlight is cast on others such as Mary, the Shepherds and the Wise Men. Even the ox and the ass who are never actually mentioned anywhere in the biblical Christmas story, get more attention than Mary's

fiancé!

Joseph is so inconspicuous in the nativity narratives, in fact, that sometimes children don't even notice that he is there. At Christmas one year, a Sunday School class made their own miniature Nativity scene complete with models of the baby Jesus, shepherds and wise men as well as oxen and sheep. When their teacher saw it, though, she was surprised to see the figure of a rather overweight man standing near the crèche. "That must be Joseph," she asked the kids, although it didn't quite match the picture of the man that she had in her mind's eye. "No, no," the children said, "that's Round John." "Round John? Who on earth is that?" the teacher asked incredulously. "Yes, miss, Round John Virgin. You know, from the Christmas carol. 'Holy Night, Silent Night, All is Calm, All is bright, Round John Virgin, Mother and Child.'"

Joseph is easy to overlook or miss out altogether. And part of the reason is that we know relatively little about him. The Gospels tell us nothing much apart from a few basic facts. That he was a descendant of King David.³ That he was engaged to be married to a girl called Mary who was about to give birth to a child out of wedlock.⁴ That he was living in Nazareth.⁵ That he had to go to his hometown of Bethlehem to comply with the regulations regarding the census.⁶ Then, when the actual birth took place, Joseph had no lines to speak in the Nativity drama. He just stood there. Looking on. In silence.

Writer, David Van Biema, in an article entitled "Father and Child" highlights the fact that there is so little in the Bible about this man. And because of this "Joseph deficit" in Scripture, he says, people have been forced to look elsewhere to fill in the background. They have turned especially to extra-Biblical sources such as the Apocrypha and the Gnostic Gospels where there are many legends and fables about Joseph.

Unfortunately, these stories tend to stretch the imagination to extreme lengths. If one has difficulty accepting the Virgin Birth then these tales are even more incredulous. In one of these non-biblical gospels, *The Protevangelium of James*, for instance, Joseph is a 90 year old man who is chosen as Mary's husband from many suitors by a dove that flies out of his staff and sits on his head!

The most mind-boggling of all the tales, though, is contained in *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* which tells how Jesus struck dead playmates who annoyed him. Friends tell Joseph that he has got to get his son under control, teaching him to bless and not curse. This he attempts to do and, at one point, yanks Jesus by the ear

only to have the boy mutter sternly to his father under his breath, “Do not vex me, father,” or words to that effect.⁷

But, though there are many non-biblical stories about Joseph, I rather prefer the small amount the Gospels tell us. Even with their few words, we can read in between the lines and learn more about Joseph, and the kind of man he really was.

For instance, the Gospels tell us that Joseph was a good and honourable man who stood by Mary at a time when community norms dictated that he leave her.⁸ Because of the terrible stigma in these days surrounding pregnancy before marriage, Joseph could easily and acceptably have ended their betrothal, subjecting her to social alienation. Or, he could have had her declared an adulteress, thus exposing her to the possibility of being stoned to death. But Joseph acted out of compassion and concern for her well-being rather than seeking to protect his own social standing and honour before the law.

So the Gospels tell us the one most important thing we need to know about Joseph. That he was a man who practised love of the very highest standard possible. Compassionate love. Self-sacrificial love. The love that his son Jesus was to learn in the carpenter’s workshop and – by his life, death and resurrection – a love he was to take to the very highest level of all.

Isn’t Joseph’s love the very kind of love we need in our world, this Christmas 2011? A world where the gap between the haves and the have-nots continues to widen. A world where the rich so often despise the poor. A world where the employed say cynically to the out-of-work and unemployable, “Get a job.” Isn’t this exactly the kind of love we need everywhere in today’s world? In the realm of business and commerce? In our social and political dealings? In our workplaces? In our community organisations? In our churches? In our families? Everywhere?

Of course, we have lots of love in our world today. But it’s the wrong kind of love. It is love of power. Love of pleasure. Love of sex. Love of money. Love of material things. Love of popularity. Love of self. We have lots of love. But these are the kinds of love that have caused a severe imbalance in the world in which we live. What we need is that kind of love, that unique kind of love, that will correct this balance.

In his book, *All About Christmas*, the Rev. James Simpson tells of a woman who had an obsessive/compulsive need to straighten things up. Whether it was rug that had a wrinkle in it in somebody’s home or a flower out-of-place in the arrangement in church on a Sunday, she couldn’t resist the need to put things right. One Christmas, while visiting her neighbour, she noticed, on the wall of her home, a painting of the manger scene. It was a beautiful picture but the trouble was that it was slightly squint. And it really bothered the woman. So when her neighbour left the room to make coffee, she surreptitiously went over and straightened up the picture. But the moment

she touched it, the picture began to play, “Angels we have heard on high”. Her neighbour came back into the room, laughing at her friend’s embarrassment, and explained how the picture was deliberately designed to play Christmas carols when straightened up as a reminder of how Christmas brings a new balance to our world.⁹

Today, in the lop-sided times in which we live, weighed down with self-interest and survival of the fittest, we urgently need a love that will straighten things up, and restore our moral and social values to a proper balance. We need a love that is other-centred, that is compassionate, that will risk all in the service of those in need. We need the love displayed by Joseph, the man in the Christmas story who plays the best supporting role. The man betrothed to Mary. The man who was the father of Jesus.

Let’s celebrate this season of the year by putting that love into practice. Let’s live out the love that will help restore our world to its proper balance. And, as we straighten up the picture of our world, maybe we’ll even hear the angels sing.

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¹ Adapted from “A Room for the Night,” www.the-jokes.com

² Source: Wikipedia, Joachim Sauer, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joachim_Sauer

³ Luke 2:4

⁴ Luke 1:27

⁵ Luke 2:4

⁶ Luke 2:5

⁷ David Van Biema, “Father and Child”, *Time* magazine, December 19, 2005, p.31

⁸ Matthew 1:19

⁹ Rev. James A. Simpson, *All About Christmas*, Outlook Book Service, December 1994