

# Homily

Fourth Sunday of Advent (A)

Fr. Derek Lappe

You know as we move through our cast of Advent characters there are many whose role is so obviously important: Gabriel, the messenger from God who spoke the Words of God to Mary, asking her to take her part, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the one chosen by God, the one who said 'Yes' to God's plan for sending his Son into the world, John the Baptist, the voice crying out in the wilderness, yelling and calling for people to convert to prepare for Christ, the prophet Isaiah from the Old Testament, who God used to tell his people to prepare for a Messiah. All of these characters come first to mind because of their very active role they have a lot to say to each of us.

But there is one who can sometimes almost be overlooked, one who is very quiet, he doesn't have a speaking role, not a word of his is recorded in Sacred Scripture, he's a doer not a talker, the strong silent type: St. Joseph.

The Son of David, foster-father of Jesus, the Just and Righteous man, the protector of the Christ Child, spouse of the Virgin Mary –St. Joseph the patron of the Universal Church, patron of fathers, patron of workers, patron of a happy death, and universally loved by Catholics. Over the years the Church has found in this man of silence one who has much to say to us.

What is St. Joseph's primary message? Simply this, as St. Matthew puts it, 'he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him.' St. Joseph teaches us about obedience to God, simply humbly doing what God asks of us, no questions asked, no showy speeches, just obedience to God. And for his obedience he received the greatest gifts from God: He was there the night the Christ Child was born into the world, he witnessed the adoration of the Angels and the Shepherds and the Wise Men, he held the baby in his arms keeping the Son of God warm that first chilly night –for his obedience St. Joseph received the gift of welcoming the Christ Child into the world.

For many people obedience is not really thought of as a virtue in our modern world. For me, the word obedience conjures up those words of the Nuremberg Trials, as the Nazis explained, 'We were just following orders.' We live in a world that divinizes the will, holding that true happiness only comes when you have the license to do what you want, when you want, with whom and to whom you want, how you want, where you want; and that any restraint based on obedience to any higher authority is unjust, oppressive, and to be defied –since as a matter of fact, there is no higher authority than my own wants, needs and will.

St. Joseph reminds us that such an attitude is contrary to God, and the scriptures remind us that even Christ was obedient, in Nazareth to his human parents, and in all His life He was obedient to His Father, 'He became obedient even unto death,' writes St. Paul. Why is Christian obedience so important? Well, what it comes down to is that we cannot think that we are going to somehow grow very close to God, progress in our relationship with Christ, love our faith in the way we want to –if we are unwilling to actually do the things that God tells us to, imitate Christ by our moral life, or put our Catholic faith into practice.

One of the priests from the North American College tells the story of being in Rome during the jubilee year at the time of the World Youth Day and one day he ran into a

young man, bright, pleasant, healthy, enjoying his time in the Eternal City, who asked, "Father, could I talk to you for a minute." The young man had just finished college, was teaching, had friends and a girlfriend. And he began to describe for this priest a deep spiritual hunger he felt, a great attraction to Jesus, a growing love for Christ, a desire to read the Gospels, to really know Christ. And with all of the wonderful things in his life he still felt this void, this emptiness that he knew only Christ could fill. He said, "I know Christ is asking me to get closer to Him, yet I can only seem to get so far. I can't seem to make that last step, it's as if something is holding me back. My faith seems limp, my prayer is listless, the hungers there, but I can't seem to take the bite of food that I know will satisfy."

And so the priest, thoroughly happy at meeting this young man, encouraged and inspired by his sincere desire for Christ, began to try to help him discover what might be the obstacle. Well, he said, it's obvious you have a deep desire to pray better, so I presume you are very faithful in attending Sunday Mass. "And the young man got a little sheepish, well, no, I go most of the time, I like to go, but I also like to stay out late on Saturday nights, and sometimes I sleep in on Sunday mornings. "So then the priest asked, "And on these Saturday nights, I guess you kind of live the way Jesus wants you to, and that you are virtuous." "Actually, the young man grimaced, "I'm a little worried about my drinking, me and my friends have been thinking we need to maybe not drink so much. "So the priest went a little further, "And the girlfriend, she's with you on this journey of faith?" The young man looked down a little further, "Actually father, it's not a chaste relationship, I know that I have been using this girl. "One last question the priest asked, "And with all of your obvious talents, you're probably involved in some service project to those in need, sharing your money and goods with the poor in some way." "Come to think of it, no," replied the young man, "I'm kind of selfish with my time and my gifts; I'm kind of living in my own little narrow world."

And then the priest tried to help the young man see, the problem is not with God's call, it's not with his very real desire to be a Christian and to have an intimate relationship with Christ, the problems not with his prayer, the problem is with not living a life of obedience to God, to Christ, to the Catholic faith. The young man was holding on to these sort of weights which encumbered and burdened his soul and kept him from being close to God.

*It's easy to see in the life of others* –you know one of the hardest things about being a priest is that my vocation is often enough to point these things out to people in the confessional or in appointments, but in fact I see in my own life the same sorts of problems, the same sorts of obstacles that are holding me back.

And so what are those things in *our* lives which hold us back: do we hold on to resentments, and nurse grudges, have we excused ourselves from forgiving or apologizing. Is it a focus on money and things, do you miss Mass on Sundays or do needless work on the day of rest, do you not go to confession, do you not set aside time to pray each day? Are you complacent with impurity, do you watch things on TV or movies that pollute your mind, do you look at pornography on the computer? Is it gossip or slander, or jealousy and envy? The list goes on, but in the end, every one of these things is a rejection of God, it's a failure to simply and humbly obey him, and thus, no, we are not going to grow closer to Him, we are not going to satisfy that deep longing for the divine which He has planted into our hearts. St. Ignatius of Loyola once taught, "Few souls understand what God would accomplish in them if they were to abandon themselves unreservedly to him, and if they were to allow his grace to mold them accordingly."

If we want to be close to Christ, if we want to truly welcome Him and follow Him, if we have the desire for God, we must combine it with obedience to Him. Jesus said, Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. We must imitate that simple and manly virtue of St. Joseph, obedience to God, He did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. ”