

St. Joseph—2016

(2 Sam 7:4....16; Rom 4:13....22; Mt 1:16....24)

I was really in trouble this time. It was the evening of March 18th, and I was clueless as to what to say in my homily today. Reluctant as I was, I called on St. Joseph for help. As often as I've called on him before, he, being a compassionate person, replied promptly but he did say, "By now you should be able to do this by yourself." "I said, please have a heart." So he relented. "All right. You usually have some episode you want information on. What is it this time?" "I'd like to know about the flight into Egypt. All that St. Matthew says is that you went and came back. What's the whole story?"

"All right, you know that Herod learned from the Magi when the star appeared, that is, when the child was born, and he ordered the massacre of all boy babies born in Bethlehem two years and younger. And so the angel of the Lord appeared to me in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt."

The Magi had left all that gold, but gold is heavy and we had to flee and that meant traveling light, so we divided it among the shepherds and left. Mary had only recently given birth and should not have been traveling so soon, but we had our faithful mule, Jericho, for her to ride on and we set out.

So we came to Egypt, but entering it was no easy thing. There were a lot of people fleeing Israel because of Herod's cruelty and violence, and Egypt was not allowing

the refugees in. Pharaoh had even contemplated building a huge, high wall all along the border to keep them out. Some people were agitating to expel all non-Egyptians from the land. So we approached the entryway with great fear. People who were destitute and might take jobs away from Egyptians or become a burden on the land were refused admittance. We had given all our gold to the shepherds and so were penniless. But I thought I might try a mind-trick. So I approached the captain in charge and said, "These people mean no harm. Let them pass through." Well, it worked! He turned to the station guard and said, "These people mean no harm. Let them pass through."

So we entered Egypt. And I, proud of what I thought I knew of biblical history, I said, "And I know what happened next!" He uttered a deep sigh and said, "All right. What happened next?" "As soon as Jesus entered the land, all the Egyptian idols fell from their places face first to the ground." "And where did you hear that?" he asked. "I don't remember; it's just something everybody knows." "Sorry to disappoint you; it didn't happen that way. I'll say something about idol worship later."

We would be here for some time and I would have to support us. The only way I could think to do that was to become a cobbler--make shoes. I had always made shoes for our little family and some of our neighbors, so I had the tools for that--my carpenter tools were too heavy for traveling light. Egyptian footwear was a little different than ours, but a kindly Egyptian cobbler, who was not afraid of a little competition, showed me some tricks of the

trade. His name was Amemu. In a country where almost everyone walks everywhere, shoes were in great demand, so business was not hard to find.

Once when I visited Amemu, he asked, "I haven't seen any household gods at your place? I've seen Jesus, and he appears to be a perfect baby. Mary could hardly have given birth to him without Tauert. He saw my puzzlement, so he added, "Tauert, the goddess of fertility and childbirth." As I still appeared to be uncomprehending, he said, "Come, I'll show you our Tauert. Tabaret, my wife has borne four children, so we have had great need of her." He took me into a small room, obviously decked out as a shrine. I almost burst out laughing. The idol of Tauert looked like a cross between a pregnant hippopotamus and a crocodile. Restraining myself, I said, "No, we worship only one God, the creator of heaven and earth." "That sounds like an impoverished religion. Beside Tauert we have Hathor, for joy, love, and motherhood, often presented as a shapely woman with a cow's face and horns. Then there is Sobek, the power of the Nile to rise and fertilize the land, represented as a crocodile; we have also Thoth, god of wisdom and magic, represented with the head of an Ibis. So much richer and more diversified than yours." "But," I asked, "why are they limited to one field each? I mean, humans have to specialize because we are limited. But if they are gods why are THEY limited? We from Israel believe in one God, infinite, almighty, eternal, who created all things and therefore in control of all things." You could see this was a new idea for him. "I'll have to think about

that," he said.

I didn't expect anything to come of it, but I hadn't counted on Jesus and Mary. Mary showed Tabaret some things about Jewish cooking and Jesus was now old enough to play with Baruti, their youngest son, and very soon the two families were closely knit through the love that emanated from those two. After some time had passed Amemu came to me and said, "Tabaret and I have been impressed with your kindness and generosity, which we've never found in Egypt. Today Tabaret looked at Tauert and said, 'I want that monstrosity out of my house,' so I broke it in little pieces and buried them. Now I've come to ask what your God looks like. Please make me an image to replace Tauert." I said, "This will come as a disappointment to you, but no image of our God is possible. Our God is like nothing in the heavens or on earth or under the earth. Our God is inexpressible, is inconceivable, and therefore cannot be represented by any image." Instead of being disappointed, he was relieved. "Ah, that means I won't have to explain a new image to my neighbors."

And then, Joseph looked at me and said, "That may be the origin of your story about the idols falling on their faces when Jesus entered the land."

"Well, I know another story which I'm sure is true. Jesus used to make birds out of clay and then give them life so that they flew away; that really impressed the Egyptian children." "What an idiotic idea!" said Joseph. "Don't you remember that in the days of Jeremiah, King Jehoiakim had Uriah, the prophet, extradited from Egypt, brought to him

so he could kill him? Herod also had an extradition treaty with Egypt, and though he had massacred all those infants, he didn't KNOW whether he had killed "the new-born king of the Jews. Any word of a *Wunderkind* in Egypt would rouse his interest. We had to keep a low profile for Jesus' safety. What is true is that I, with my carpenter skills, used to carve little wooden birds for Jesus, who gave them to the boys of the neighborhood."

Well, we lived peaceably there for some time. Amemu, it turned out, was quite an effective apostle of the one imageless God; he had heard that several centuries earlier Ahkenaten had attempted to establish worship of Atun alone, the Solar Disk, but he had been judged a heretic. Jesus and Mary were so well-liked for their love and gentleness that Amemu's activity was greatly expedited. No wonder the gospel was so readily accepted when St. Mark came there to proclaim it.

And so we stayed for some time, and life there was peaceful. But then one night the angel of the Lord appeared to me in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." Our new-found friends wept to see us go. And I went with a heavy heart, for I knew that though Herod was dead, evil would always seek to destroy the good, wherever it was. I knew that Jesus, the absolute good, was destined for a terrible struggle with evil. Mary would suffer with Him, and her soul a sword would pierce. I understood these things because they were foreseen in Isaiah's prophecy of the One he called the Just

One, supremely the Servant of the Lord. By His suffering He would justify the many. But in the end He would see the light in fullness of days and divide the spoils with the mighty--words that conceal unimaginable glory, glory you are called to share. All this you will be experiencing not many days from now.