

St. Joseph--2020
(2 Sam 7:4-16; Rom 4:13-22; Mt 1:16-24)

I was really in trouble this time. Last night I was still clueless as to what to say in my homily today. So I called on St. Joseph for help. He came in answer to my prayer, but said, "Why do you always wait till the last minute?" "I always think I can do it by myself but I fail. I realize I need help from you." There was a long sigh. "All right, I'll help." Then, "You usually want me to tell you about one of the gospel narratives." In fact I'd like to return to what we spoke of last year, the finding of the child Jesus in the Temple. I still have a lot of questions about that, the Fifth Joyful Mystery of the Rosary. First of all, how did the Child Jesus get lost in the first place? Did he lose track of time and miss the caravan's departure?

No, he was actually hiding and watching as the caravan moved off without Him. A long time after the caravan had disappeared Simeon found Him wandering in the Temple. Although Jesus had been only a tiny infant years earlier, the first time Simeon had seen Him and took Him in his arms and blessed him, on this trip Simeon had seen the child Jesus with Mary and Joseph and so could recognize Him. Now he addressed Him, "Oho, young man, did you miss your caravan?" "No," Jesus answered, "I stayed behind on purpose. I need to find the wise men who hang out here in the Temple. I have a lot of questions that the Rabbi in Nazareth is not able to answer. He keeps telling me, that I should consult the wise men in the Temple, the scribes and Pharisees, the doctors of the law,

so that's who I'm looking for now--the wise men who are learned in our law and our religion."

Simeon was silent for SO long a time Jesus began to wonder. Finally Simeon said, "Lots of luck to you on that."

When Jesus asked what he meant, he didn't answer. He just said, "It's too late to send you after the caravan now; the roads will be full of bandits. Spend the night with me and my wife and in the morning we'll go to the Temple, and I'll show you the people you are looking for."

"So it came to pass," as St. Joseph resumed his story, "when Mary and I got to the Temple, Jesus was seated there surrounded by scribes and Pharisees. When Simeon saw us he intercepted us, silenced us, and urged us to stay out of sight and just listen."

"Jesus was addressing the one seated in the first place, who looked very self-important. Jesus was asking him, "which is the most important commandment of the law?" The man answered, "the Sabbath commandment." "Why? Jesus asked" "Because it has the most specifications, how it is to be observed: what time it begins and what time it ends, the candles to be lit, food to be prepared beforehand, etc., etc." "And you think that makes it the most important?" "Yes." "How about the commandment "to love the Lord your God?" "That's so vague and unspecific; there is no way to know how to do it." Jesus responded, "How about 'with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength'?" The others seated there hid their faces so he wouldn't see them smiling for this big-shot being so easily bested by a mere stripling." In anger he replied, "You are unclean! I saw you eating

with unwashed hands.” That was untrue, but Jesus took up the word to reply, “Leviticus and Ezekiel together have 52 references to uncleanness and none of them relate to unwashed hands. That is your own tradition, and Isaiah the prophet said, ‘This people draws near with words only and honors me with lips alone, though their hearts are far from me, and fear of me has become mere precept of human teaching’ (Isa 29:13). Then one of them rose threateningly and said, ‘Let’s show Him what we do to little smart-alecks!’”

At this Simeon pushed Mary and me forward and said, “Claim you son”—which is what we did. Later Simeon said to us, “When He is grown, teach Him never to engage in a debate like this. He may think it fun, but they are in deadly earnest. They will take counsel, entrap him, and they will put Him to death.”

Joseph told me, “I took these as words of wise counsel, but Mary took them as prophecy. Earlier she had heard this same Simeon prophecy, ‘This child shall be a sign that will be contradicted and you yourself a sword shall pierce’ (Luke 2:34-35).” Now she was learning how this would happen—they will take counsel and put Him to death.”

I said to Joseph, “this is pretty grim for a homily! ” He said, “A homily should be realistic. This is Lent. Lent leads to Holy Week and Easter; that path is not all lightness and joy. For you and others it should be a time to consider how we arrive at Easter. The scribes and Pharisees WILL take counsel against Jesus and WILL put Him to death. Mary’s heart WILL be pierced in a way we can never

imagine. She understood that Jesus, her Son, was also the Servant of the Lord foretold by Isaiah, that His death would be for all of us.

“Lent,” Joseph went on, “involves realizing that all this has happened because of our sins; it is a time of realizing God’s great love for us and how much love we owe in return, a time of asking how CAN we make a return. A partial answer is, negatively, by having truly heartbroken contrition for our sins. Positively, by seriously understanding how, concretely, we love God by showing love for others. What other way is there to the holiness God wills for us? How we love one another determines how we treat each other. In the old days, Compline began with a pause for recalling sins, followed by the Confiteor. This may have been too perfunctory to be effective, but an examination of conscience each night, asking myself how I have treated others this day would be a good practice. Have I been judgmental in my thoughts of them? Have I treated them as though I love them—realizing that Jesus takes whatever we do or don’t do to another as done or not done to Himself. Have I treated them as I would want to be treated? Is there room for improvement? We should always want to be holy—to be perfect in love.

As St. Joseph departed, he said, "Now you understand why it is appropriate that my solemnity comes in Lent: it directs us to Jesus as our Model and our Guide."