

YEAR of SAINT JOSEPH



“Show yourself a father, and guide us in the path of life”

REFLECTION - APRIL 2021

St Joseph – Man of Dreams

Mt 1:20, Mt 2:13, 19, 22

Luke’s Gospel speaks of a single visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary, setting her path for the rest of her life. In Matthew’s Gospel, we hear of an angel visiting Joseph some four times, guiding him step by step through troubled times. Interestingly, these visitations come to the sleeping Joseph in his dreams.

As a carpenter, Joseph would have been no stranger to silence. We can imagine him spending time alone, honing his patience and concentration as he worked the wood. Perhaps there is a link between this silent way of Joseph and the silent way of dreams in which the angel communicates with him? We could be fooled in thinking that, as a man of dreams, Joseph lived in a fantasy world. Nothing could be farther from the truth. As a man of dreams, Joseph has much to teach us about the power of trust, the power of prayer and the power of discerning God’s presence in our lives.

Joseph’s dreams come to him at difficult times, when he is afraid and needs to make important decisions. The first dream comes after he finds out about Mary’s pregnancy and has decided to dismiss her. The dream allows Joseph, the righteous man who knew the law, to interpret the law with love. He might have been





angry and disappointed, yet he acts as if he is saying what his step-son would say to a woman about to be stoned almost thirty years later, “He who has never sinned, let him cast the first stone” (John 8:7).

Joseph’s dreams are brief, or at least the snippets we hear are brief. In the second dream, the angel tells Joseph to get up, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt and stay there until further instructions. If we listen to the Scriptures and the saints, it would seem that brevity is a strong characteristic of spiritual experiences. St Teresa of Avila writes very clearly that the duration of a rapture is short, and any prolonged raptures are more often due to the sister not being in control of herself, than to God!¹



Joseph’s dreams give clear instructions. In the third dream, again Joseph is told to get up, take the child and his mother and go to Israel, for those seeking the child’s life are dead. They also give reason and encourage. In the first dream, Joseph is told to name the child Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. In the fourth dream, he is warned that Herod’s son has replaced him and so to go to Galilee. Somehow Joseph knows to trust these messages. There is no fussing, no questioning or consulting other’s opinions; he simply acts. Think how steadfast his trust in God must have been to know that what came to him in a dream was not to be questioned.

Do you trust your dreams? Dreaming is an interesting phenomenon and research continues into its function in our lives. Dreams help our

brains work through the myriad experiences of our day – a kind of mental processing and decluttering.² Scripture also attests to dreams as a powerful sign of the presence of God. God is believed to actively speak through dreams as we hear in the Book of Joel, “...your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2:28).

Joseph’s dreams offer us a lesson in discernment. When we are plagued by troubles, it can be very difficult to get to sleep, let alone rest enough to be aware of a dream. To do so, we must trust, surrendering all our cares to God. We might even say we surrender our cares in exchange for our dreams!

Joseph reminds us that rest is essential if we are to hear God’s voice and understand what is being asked of us. He shows us what happens when we wait patiently even in fearful circumstances, trusting and remaining open to how Love might work in our lives. Just as Paul reminded the Romans to be transformed by the renewing of the mind so as to discern the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2) – Joseph reminds us to allow our minds to be renewed through our dreams.

The fact that we hear about four of Joseph’s dreams reminds us too that discernment works in all aspects of our lives. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit and it is honed with experience. The Desert Fathers and Mothers prayed for the gift of discernment in all things. They knew that discernment in every aspect of life requires flexibility, constant self-examination and spiritual awareness.³ Just as Joseph’s actions were constantly guided by the angel’s instructions, we too need to adapt our spiritual practices to work, family and community demands, always alert to the need for change.



Finally, you are probably aware that Pope Francis has a special devotion to St Joseph. “I have great love for Saint Joseph, because he is a man of silence and strength. On my table I have a statue of Saint Joseph sleeping. Even when he is asleep, he is taking care of the Church! So when I have a problem, a difficulty, I write a little note and I put it underneath Saint Joseph, so that he can dream about it! In other words I tell him: pray for this problem! ...”⁴

Joseph, the man of dreams, reminds us that prayer and discernment are not about what we do, so much as how we keep our hearts open to the gifts of God. We must wait for what comes, inwardly attentive, always ready to live the messages of Love. So, happy dreaming tonight. Remember the Psalmist’s advice (Ps 127) that your earlier rising and going later to rest are in vain, for gifts will be poured on you the beloved as you sleep, just like Joseph!

Michelle Vass is director of the St Mary’s Towers Retreat Centre, Douglas Park, a work of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart.

¹ St Teresa of Avila, the Book of Her Foundations – A Study Guide, Marc Foley, O.C.D., ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington DC, 2012, pp83,84

² Kendra Cherry, 16/6/20, Why do we dream? <https://www.verywellmind.com/why-do-we-dream-top-dream-theories-2795931>

³ Balance of the Heart – Desert Spirituality for Twenty – First Century Christians, Lois Farag, Cascade Books, Eugene OR, 2012, pp 173 – 186.

⁴ Sermon of Pope Francis, January 16, 2015 (Philippines)

