



The FURROW

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Saint Joseph and the Future of the Irish Church

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Iconographically, Saint Joseph usually arrives coated in unreality – either a young and virile carpenter in his rustic workshop, or an older guardian standing in the wings, when Mary claims the centre of artistic and divine attention. Even if it is understandable that Joseph never captured the artistic imagination in the same way as Mary, it is interesting that, in contrast to other Matthean men – Peter, Judas, and even the Magi who make a cameo appearance in one scene (in Matt 2:1-12), Joseph never manages to assert himself in his own right. Medieval and Renaissance art never tired of the Adoration of the Magi; think of the famous capital in the Cathedral of Autun with its Three Kings in bed, still crowned, while the angel's finger is poised to touch an exposed kingly hand and announce his arrival into their dream. Autun's is just one of thousands of images of Matthew's Magi, images filled with resplendent robes, lavish jewels, and exotic containers for their gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And Joseph, if he's there at all, remains in the shadows, tired – out of it, as it were. Even in the myriad depictions of the 'Flight into Egypt,' Joseph is on the margins, while sympathy is evoked for the Virgin and her child.¹ That the command to bring the child and its mother to Egypt was given to Joseph (see Matt 2:13-15), or that Joseph plays a pivotal role does not come to the fore.

Joseph has been kept in the shadows. However, a closer reading of Matthew's account of the Annunciation to Joseph (Matt 1:18–24) yields a very different Joseph.

READING BIBLICAL STORIES TODAY

To read a text closely, two key insights about the character of the

1 Take, for example, Luc-Olivier Merson's 'Rest on the Flight into Egypt' (Museum of Fine Art, Boston) with Joseph beside the embers, while Mary and her child nestled in the arms of a Sphinx radiate an almost heavenly light. An online search for Merson + rest + flight + Egypt will yield many images.

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biblical text need to be brought to the fore. The first insight is ancient: namely, that the biblical text is alive (see Hebrews 4:1). It is not some fossilised formula but something that demands being read with openness.² Reading with openness permits a passage to say something we may not have heard before, in a way we had not imagined before, and to illuminate issues we had not considered before. As in the meeting with a person, while openness takes time to foster and grow, it results in an enriching, empowering, and consoling encounter with the word. In the words of Gregory the Great, *scriptura cum legente crescit* – ‘Scripture grows with the one reading it.’³

The second insight comes from more recent scholarship: a biblical passage needs to be permitted to speak on its own terms. Frequently, biblical texts are closed down by extraneous considerations: ‘St Joseph couldn’t have thought X because....;’ ‘Since Saint Luke would have heard this directly from Our Lady ...;’ ‘Since Matthew was’ Other external considerations are more subtle, ‘the Evangelist wouldn’t have been capable of such a level of complexity!’ While medieval allegorical interpretation could tend towards the fanciful, contemporary readers underestimate the depth and sophistication of ancient texts at the risk of profound impoverishment. Reading a biblical narrative with openness, for example, the Sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22), can be a raw and unsettling experience; it can shock us, make us unsure of what God is like or it means to claim that Abraham was a person of faith. But that uncertainty can be the very opening of heart to the living and true God. Let us try then to read Matthew’s account of the Annunciation to Joseph in the context of Matthew, and strive for some measure of openness to who Matthew’s Joseph is and to what happens to him.

INTRODUCING MATTHEW’S JOSEPH

The *genesis* of Jesus Christ was like [this]: when his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child *from* the Holy Spirit; her husband Joseph, being righteous and not willing to make a example of her, resolved to dismiss her *quietly* (1:18b–19).⁴

2 This is put well by the Spanish biblical scholar, Francisco Contreras Molina: ‘the word of God is not something fossilized in the Bible. It is *not* dead. ... The word is asleep within the Bible. ... Without an *epiclesis*, the word remains asleep.’ *Leer la Biblia como Palabra de Dios [Reading the Bible as the Word of God]* (Estella: EVD, 2007), 188.

3 Gregory the Great, *Moralia* 20,1 (CCL, 143A, 1003)

4 All biblical references from here on, unless otherwise noted, are to the Gospel of Matthew.

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As we begin to read, let us try to remember that we're reading with an eye to Joseph.⁵ At the beginning of the account the reader knows more about what's going on than does Joseph. The reader knows who Jesus is, Joseph does not! The reader knows the origin of this child, Joseph does not! Joseph is left trying to manage a situation where his betrothed is carrying a child that is not his! In a few strokes Matthew paints Joseph – he is righteous, he does not need to make a display, he decides to act.

Joseph's righteousness is not just a statement about Joseph, it is a statement about Joseph, the Law and God! Being righteous, involves 'obedience to the divine will' expressed in the keeping of the commandments of the Law.⁶ It is right relationship expressed in right action. Joseph's righteousness is expressed in his decision to dismiss Mary quietly. His action is motivated by his desire not to make a show. His action is motivated by his care for Mary. While he feels he must dismiss her, he will not do so in a way that increases her victimization. Joseph does not know whose child this is, only that it *not* his. Letting the text speak, one can see how his care for his betrothed guides his action. His righteousness – to cite the adult Jesus – 'exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees' (5:20); he is not one who 'practises his righteousness before others in order to be seen by them' (6:1). Matthew's Joseph embodies already what the son of his betrothed will teach in the Sermon on the Mount and beyond.

ENTER AN ANGEL!

While Joseph has just decided to act, his clear and compassionate plan of action is upset:

But as he decided this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son ... (1:20–21a)

With characteristic Old Testament panache (Behold!) and timing, *an* angel of the Lord appears! The angel's divine revelation proposes an alternative plan of action (take Mary as your wife), provides an alternative explanation as the genesis of that which is within her (of the Holy Spirit), as well as outlining the significance of all this. The result is dramatic.

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord *commanded* him; he took his wife to himself ... (1:24)

5 This is not to say that there are not other perspectives possible, but the Joseph perspective is central in Matthew's account.

6 See Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Zvi Brettler (eds), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press (USA), 2011), 7.

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Three dimensions are significant: it happens in a dream, Joseph changes his mind, and the Lord commands something new.

THREE DIMENSIONS

First what has happened to Joseph has this happened in a dream; in other words, beneath Joseph's rational threshold. There is a discontinuity in that Joseph thought one line of action through, but the second has come from elsewhere.

Matthew is very concerned with interiority, as can be seen towards the centre of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus pleads, 'When you give alms When you pray ... When you fast ... you are to go into that secret place and your (pl.) Father who sees in secret will reward you.' (6:1–8) In the Annunciation to Joseph the reader is shown what is happening in Joseph's 'secret place,' and how Joseph acts after his encounter with the Lord.

There is a further dimension: the angel of the Lord *commands* (orders) Joseph; it is as if he has been told, 'you have heard how it was said, but now I say to you.' Joseph was told one thing (on which he was about to act), now he has heard another (on which he will act). This foreshadows the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, 'you have heard how it was said, but now I say to you.' (5:21–44). The second line of action is not of the same order, it is not as easy to 'pin down.'

That said, Joseph has changed his mind. This third dimension – the changing of one's mind in the light of what it unfolds, as can be seen in the Allegory of the Two Children (21:28–32) – is an important quality for Matthew. The allegory begins as follows:

What do you think? A man had two children (*tekna*); he went to the first and said, 'Child, go and work in the vineyard *today*.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later *he changed his mind* and went. The *father* went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I'll go, *Lord*'; but he did not go. Which of the two did *the will of the father*? They said, 'The first' (21:28–31).⁷

The hero of the allegory is the child who changes his mind, and thereby does the will of the (sic!) father. The allegory witnesses to a fundamental quality of narratives in communicating what cannot be said, or must be left unsaid. This captures the reality that sometimes those whose 'yes' makes the difference, are those who initially said, 'No!' Neither Matthew nor Jesus can say, 'Blessed are those who say yes having previously said no ...!' Still, Matthew

7 The resonance of the vocabulary with the Lord's Prayer (6:9–13) is noteworthy: *father, today, will*, and in the concluding summary, *kingdom*:

'Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.' (21:32)

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constantly witnesses to people who make poor initial decisions, and ‘change their minds’ and act differently (see 7:24). Even Jesus changes his mind, as he did in the encounter with the Canaanite woman whom he initially ignored!

While Joseph *initially* decided to release Mary from her marriage obligations, what unfolded in his dream brings him to change his mind, and do what God wills. *The Allegory of the Two Children* illuminates what is happening to Joseph: it is not what you *initially* say, but what you finally do that is of importance for Matthew.⁸

MATTHEW’S JOSEPH – A COUNTER-CULTURAL MAN

Drawing these strands together, we see that Joseph is portrayed as someone in whom something happens, and who is in touch with what is happening inside of him. He is able to discern what is said, leave his initial decision behind, and follow another calling. In the honour culture of the first century Judaism such freedom would have come at a high price. Changing one’s mind, not adhering to the widely-accepted religious-social mores would have damaged one’s status in a culture in which one’s perception by one’s peers was pivotal.

Even more fundamental is that the Lord asks Joseph to embrace a ‘fatherhood’ which might be termed a non-virile fatherhood. For males among the historically plausible readership of Matthew, this would be seen as eroding Joseph’s masculinity. What the Lord asks of him can be perceived as emasculating him. He is asked *not* to act according to the religious and cultural norms of his time. He is being asked to give up the power he has over Mary and over his situation. Effectively, he is being asked to embody impotence. He is being un-manned.⁹

What then of Joseph the man? Whence his manhood? Whence his status? The reflection above drew parallels between Matthew’s portrait of Joseph and the concerns and values of Matthew’s broader narrative. It emerges that Joseph’s values are key for Jesus, and that which is praised by Jesus is already embodied in Joseph. We may see this either eschatologically or incarnationally. Eschatologically, one might argue that the light of Christ shines throughout time, and so Joseph is inspired by the risen Lord in mystery. Incarnationally,

8 The Greek for ‘changed his mind’ [*metamelomai*] occurs only one other time in Matthew – about another who changed his mind, but those to whom he went had no concern for him. That one – Judas, who when he ‘changed his mind’ about what he had done to Jesus (27:3), returned to the Chief Priests (he acted!), but – for them – he had served his purpose and they were about *their* business *their will* and not the *will of their Father*.

9 A parallel process may be seen in Matthew’s never giving Joseph his own voice; the narrator recounts what Joseph did, the angel addresses him, but the audience never hears Joseph for themselves. In thus silencing him, Matthew further un-mans him.

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we might ask how Joseph embodied humanity and masculinity for Jesus. If we take the incarnation seriously, then the man in Jesus' home must have exerted a significant influence on him. Put another way, without Joseph, Jesus would have been different! This may be a little disconcerting at first. However, if Christ's humanity is taken seriously, then Mary and Joseph must have exerted huge influence on this child. If we take the incarnation seriously, then some root of the Sermon on the Mount must have sprung from Joseph's heart. U. A. Fanthorpe's expression of Joseph's hopes in her poem, 'Joseph' capture the dynamic,

I am Joseph who wanted
To teach my own boy how to live.
My lesson for my foster son:
Endure. Love. Give.¹⁰

While Fanthorpe may project onto Joseph a broad view of the Christian gospel (endure, love, give), Matthew paints Joseph in the colours and hues of his own particular narrative. Consequently, Joseph is the one who goes the second mile for Mary (see 6:41), and will have to turn the other cheek to be true to what has unfolded within him (see 6:39). He thus risks mockery and shame for the sake of his beloved and for the sake of his Lord.

In the world out of which the New Testament emerged, 'honour is the greatest social value, to be preferred over wealth and even life itself [since] without a good reputation, life has no meaning.'¹¹ The Christian story, however, maps honour in a another way: the one who has honour is last of all and servant of all (see 20:27), and the one who is Lord, master and teacher is one who was degraded, shamefully treated, and killed.

But there is more, Joseph's increasing refusal to conform to the norms for cultivating his masculinity prefigure the fate of Jesus who will not only be shamed and annihilated in his passion, but who will also have his fragile manhood exposed and extinguished. In her study of key male characters in Luke-Acts in relation to constructions of masculinity in the Greco-Roman world,¹² American scholar Brittany Wilson concludes that Luke's construction of unmanly men among Jesus and his followers points to the need for the male followers of Jesus to derive their strength from God's power alone, and not from aligning themselves with their culture's

10 U. A. Fanthorpe (1929–2009), *Christmas Poems* (London: Enitharmon, 2002).

11 Carolyn Osiek, *What are they Saying about the Social Setting of the New Testament?* (2d ed; New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1992), 27.

12 Brittany E. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (New York: Oxford University Press [USA], 2015). Such an exploration has yet to be undertaken for Matthew.

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cultivation of manliness. What she says of Luke's depiction of Jesus as 'born into a differently construed family, where God is in control and men are not on top'¹³ also rings true for the family of Joseph and Mary into which Matthew's Jesus is born.

JOSEPH AND THE FUTURE OF THE IRISH CHURCH

In Irish Catholicism, God remains a God out there and is either ignored or dismissed by us. In other words, God remains an idea. Admittedly an idea we speak about frequently, but still an idea! We leave God alone and hope that God will leave us alone. Allowing God to impinge upon us (i.e., permitting God to be alive) is not really part of 'the programme.' This may seem harsh, but I fear it is closer to the truth than we imagine.

Irish Catholics speak about the Church, the Pope, the Mass, the clergy, the Bishops, Catholic Schools, the sacraments, as these are the realities that impinge upon us, concern us, but not God (and certainly not Christ). God gets a nod or a fist or a dose of bile when something 'bad' happens to ourselves or to someone who is important to us, but that is only intermittent and rarely changes anything.

So what might Matthew's Joseph have to say to us?

Firstly, we might note the type of human being, and in particular, the type of man Joseph is: he is concerned about Mary, but his initial decision about their future is limited by his religious and cultural horizon. When this dawns on him, he is open to change. As Catholics in Ireland we need to discover how to say, 'We make this decision, we thought this would be good, we now see things differently.'

Second, God is in the depth of Joseph's life. Reading Matthew closely might cause us to be less sure about what Joseph knows, but Joseph has an sensitivity and openness to God. That is not to say that he has no sensitivity to synagogue or community; but it is to say that he is sensitive to God who manifests himself in the depth of his life not on its surface. A church or a parish community which is not fostering this sensitivity is on the road to death.

Third, this sensitivity and openness to God means both homecoming and disturbance for Joseph. The word of the angel brings him to his deepest self, but it will inevitably lead to conflict and loss of status. What God asks of him, makes him into another type of male, and another type of human being. It will make him more Christ-like; it will bring him on the way of the cross. If the Catholic Church in Ireland is to come to new life, then we need to find ways of permitting the God who makes all things new bring us home 'by another road' (see 2:12). That will involve a radical

13 Ibid., 246.

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re-imagining of our horizons, what we are sensitive to, what we foster, what is important for us, and how we see configure our status and our self-worth. It will lead to conflict and confusion. It will also lead to having what Joseph received in Mary both the woman he loved and Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Cleaning the stairs. I was very often in seminars or courses for heads of companies, and that was always clear: the stairs are cleaned from above, not from below – from the top down, not the bottom up. So the leaders must begin; the chiefs must begin. The mentality must change. The church is not a business, but the methods are not so different. We have to work more in teams, in projects. The question is: Who has the resources to bring these ideas forward? Not: Who belongs to the clergy? God gives us all these people, and we say, ‘No, he is not a cleric, he cannot do this job.’ Or ‘His idea is not so important.’ That is not acceptable. No, no, no.

– CARDINAL REINHARD MARX, interviewed by Luke Hansen, *America*.