

Fourth Sunday in Advent December 19, 2010

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-14; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24

Just Lead Your Donkey

One more week until Christmas, and I will need all that time as Grandpa Santa tries to finish refurbishing two old rusty Radio Flyer wagons and assembling and decorating two wooden jack-in-the-boxes.

This year we have almost four full weeks of Advent for preparation. And that is a good thing. As Father Ward mentioned at the beginning of Advent, the season has two separate parts. The Church's General Norms of the Liturgical Year states: "*Advent has a twofold character: as a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ's first coming to us is remembered; as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ's Second Coming at the end of time. Advent is thus a period for devout and joyful expectation.*"

From the First Sunday in Advent until December 16th we are reminded to prepare for Christ's Second Coming. But on December 17th we shifted to focus on Advent's other character, the remembrance of His First Coming as the baby Jesus. We see this in our liturgy, for example. For the last three weeks, when Father has sung the preface, the prayer just before the Holy, Holy, Holy, it included these words: "*Now we watch for the day, hoping that the salvation promised us will be ours when Christ our Lord will come again in his glory.*" But today the preface will include these words: "*In his love Christ has filled us with joy as we prepare to celebrate his birth, so that when he comes he may find us watching in prayer, our hearts filled with wonder and praise.*"

We also see this change in focus in our readings. Instead of calls to repentance and making straight our paths, this morning we heard Isaiah prophesy of Jesus' birth as he writes: "*Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.*" And, of course, in our gospel story St. Matthew tells how Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled. But it also presents us with the great example of St. Joseph's faith and trust in the Lord; his willingness to be quietly obedient and accepting of God's will. We often honor Mary, and that is a good thing, but St. Joseph deserves some attention as well. In some ways it is easier for us to relate to him.

There is a lot we can learn from the little we know about St. Joseph; information that can help us on our journeys. It's good to have a devotion to him and I was reminded and made more aware of this fact on my recent 10-day wilderness retreat that I mentioned back in September. On that retreat, I spent a lot of time trying to listen to hear what God wants me to do as I walked the trails through the woods. On the first day I hiked out, appropriately enough, to the St. Joseph campsite to visit and retrace my steps from my first wilderness retreat there ten years earlier. It caused me to reflect on my patron saint and how he obediently followed God's will in some very dramatic and courageous ways: accepting a pregnant wife into his home; travelling with Mary to Bethlehem; fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod's persecution; and then returning to Nazareth when the angel instructed him that the coast was clear. Joseph was obviously open to hearing God speak to him, and it was a reminder to me to increase my devotion to him; and to try to better model myself after him to become a better husband and father. And so, I tried to listen more

attentively to what God was calling me to do. But as I continued walking, I didn't hear much more.

Half way through my retreat, I began to wonder if this would be a meaningful retreat, if I would get any direction for my life, or would it be simply a boring 10-day camping trip. To give it a kick start, as I went to bed one evening I considered the possibility of spending a night in the chapel in prayer. The next morning, the gospel reading at daily Mass was Luke 6:12-19 which started: "***Jesus departed to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God.***" It seemed like a sign to me, and so I decided to spend that entire night listening, from sundown to sunrise, in the chapel alone with Jesus present in the tabernacle. But as the sun came up, I was frustrated because I had not heard or sensed anything.

I had hoped to hear some message and get some direction for my life. I wanted to be more tuned into the spiritual world, but I realized that maybe that wasn't God's will. And so my prayer intention became to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit according to God's will, not mine. I prayed with this new intention to St. Joseph and reflected on how he accepted his role. Obviously his spirituality was different than that of the other members of his household; different from Mary's and obviously different than that of Jesus. I should be willing to accept that my spirituality will be different from the priests and brothers up at the Companions of Christ the Lamb Retreat Center. As I continued to search, I stumbled upon a book in the chapel there: *Abandonment to Divine Providence* by Jean-Pierre de Caussade. It provided me with some insights regarding the concept of abandoning ourselves to God's will; a concept which is very central to the Companions of Christ the Lamb community. It is about seeing all of our little actions and sacrifices and prayers of everyday life as part of God's great plan. And this, I think, is the key to St. Joseph's greatness; all those actions he performed quietly to raise his family that were never recorded and acknowledged. And as I wrapped up my retreat, I came to the conclusion that this is the area I needed to concentrate on for improvement and I offer it to you for consideration as well. Most of us would like to have an angel appear to us and tell us what we should do. And often God does send us subtle messages to help us make important decisions in life such as choosing a spouse or a career or a vocation. We often listen for and are willing to accept some of these more dramatic calls that we have hear from God. But we often struggle with accepting our everyday duties that we know God expects us to perform with joy instead of grumbling.

After Mass on the last morning of my retreat, I gave my retreat report to the community and summarized my experiences and my conclusion. After Mass, one of the gentlemen in the congregation came up to me and expressed my complicated thoughts in a much more simple way. He said that to be like St. Joseph, that you have to be willing to "just lead your donkey."

And so I ask you, are you willing to "just lead your donkeys"; to humbly do your part and act out your role in God's master plan—even though you cannot possibly understand how your contributions and actions can make a difference? Think about St. Joseph during this last week of Advent, this last week of expectation and preparation before we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Think about his sacrifices, made without fanfare, that contributed to changing the world and enabling our salvation. Listen to God in prayer and be willing and ready to accept major callings and vocations as St. Joseph did when the angel spoke to him. But remember that most of the time we are simply called to carry out our ordinary daily responsibilities with joy and without complaining. It may be getting up early to go to work, patiently being stuck in rush hour traffic, doing work around the home, doing your homework and chores, or simply spending time in the

basement painting a little red wagon. We may be called to simply lead our donkey, step by step, down the straight and narrow path that God calls us to follow.

Deacon Joe Hulway