



Saints – Old and New

Joseph

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Deuteronomy 26, 1–11

Matthew 1, 18–25

The Joseph of the Bible is a shadowy figure. He is known to three of the Gospels, but not to earliest Gospel, that of Mark. In John, Joseph is merely mentioned in passing as the father of Jesus; in Matthew's Gospel he has his most prominent role, when angelic messengers in dreams guide him first to marry the unaccountably pregnant Mary, and then to take his family away to Egypt to escape the furies of Herod. In Luke, Joseph is just a name and never so much as speaks – when, in Chapter 2, the boy Jesus loses his parents in Jerusalem, it is Mary who does the telling off. And after that story from Christ's boyhood, Joseph is lost to sight – in Christ's adult life he is remembered as Jesus's father, and as a carpenter, but only remembered, never present.

Not much to go on here when it comes to painting a picture, but the popular imagination of the Middle Ages, when it came to conjure up Joseph, did so under the demands of the piety surrounding Mary, which held her to be ever virgin. So Augustine, preaching one Christmas day sometime around 400 AD, hails Mary 'a virgin in conceiving, a virgin in giving birth, a virgin when with child, a virgin on being delivered, a virgin for ever'. Now for an ever-virgin wife the right husband was obviously a man of such maturity – or better still, such decrepitude – that he would not resent, and might even be glad of, his wife's vocation. So it is that the Joseph of popular iconography of the 13th century onwards is a sleepy, often corpulent old man, who would hardly tempt Mary into marital relations, even were he himself tempted or capable. Thus a happy and mutual abstinence was assured in the home life of the Holy Family.

In the picture you see before you, El Greco has, quite unusually, ignored the regular iconographic conventions and pious proprieties, in giving us a youthful Joseph. Joseph is not an especially or remarkably young father – he is not a teenage dad – but he is certainly not old either. We have a Joseph of some vigour and virility.

But it is not only the age of this Joseph which breaches the normal conventions – the scene is somewhat unusual in another sense. In terms of Oscar nominations, Joseph could normally hope for no more than a run at the Oscar for best supporting actor – indeed, he would normally be out of the running altogether, since for every painting in which Joseph appears, I would guess there are twenty where Joseph is nowhere to be seen, and mother and child are intensely engaged with each other alone. But even when he does appear, he is, most often in the background as supporting cast. It is quite rare

indeed that he takes centre stage with Jesus as a baby or here, as a child. And only very rarely indeed does he take centre stage as other than a rather frail and feeble old man. But this centre stage tall and lean Joseph is a father in his prime – and essentially so to fulfil the role in which he is cast in this picture.

But what is that role? What do we see or understand about Joseph, besides simply that he is relatively youthful when we study this picture?

Joseph carries a staff, or perhaps a crook. He is undertaking a journey, shepherding the child along the way. And in the background, under that looming and forbidding sky, we see a city – Toledo in fact, as it appears in so many of Greco's paintings, for Toledo was his home in Spain from when he arrived there in 1577 by way of Venice and Rome, an exile and wanderer from his native Crete. Do Joseph and Jesus journey to or from this city, we might ask? Nothing in the disposition of the figures gives us an answer, but Christ, so we know, was on earth journeying away from home, to the far country of the parable, sent from his father: 'foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head'. So it is not towards home, but away from it that these two journey. And as they pause on this journey, the Christ child clings to Joseph – in fear say some commentators¹ – though I would be minded to say not fearfully, but maybe somewhat apprehensively. His hand is placed on Joseph, perhaps seeking the protection which Joseph offers, but perhaps also offering it himself since Joseph's visage is one of troubled distraction (and we know that nothing disturbs a small child quite as much as seeing the distress of their parents). In any case, Joseph inclines towards the child protectively, and places his own hand close to the child's head, seeming almost to point to him with his index finger. The two are bound together in a solidarity of 'tender sadness' and mutual concern, as they make their way under that threatening, glowering, sombre, sky – as if both already sense the end of the journey on which they are set, hinted at by the blood red robe of a martyr worn by that solemn child.

But then above them both – in curious contrast to the gravity of their circumstances as portended by the portentous sky – there is a veritable circus of tumbling cherubs, defying gravity, ready to garland Joseph with laurels, wreathes and flowers. The solemn gravity of the world below is in stark contrast to the 'impetuous joy in the sky'² above – a celebration very much directed towards Joseph, on whose head these tokens of heavenly esteem are falling.

Why this solemn joy, or joyful solemnity? Why is Joseph – this biblically somewhat misty figure – celebrated in this picture with such abundant heavenly acrobatics and excess of flowers and foliage? Why does Joseph receive the honours bestowed on him from above?

The answer is simple enough: 'Joseph', so we read in Matthew's Gospel, 'was a good man' – his goodness evidenced right at the beginning of the story we heard as our second lesson by his resolution to put away quietly the mysteriously pregnant Mary, to whom he is as yet betrothed but not married. But Joseph's goodness goes beyond a delicacy of feeling and generosity in determining not to disgrace publicly his compromised fiancée. His goodness is surely greater in that, at the prompting of a mere dream, he chooses, not merely not to bring disgrace to Mary, but to become the earthly father of Christ,

¹ L. Bronstein, *El Greco* (London, 1991), 66.

² *Ibid.*

and to have a care of this child in this child's life on earth. He chooses to become the earthly father of Christ. 'Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife' the angel says to him in a dream – and following this prompt he takes Mary to wife and becomes the father of Christ.

Dreams, you know, are never finally compelling, even in the Bible – they speak only ambiguously and uncertainly. They always need reading – they always need interpretation. They can always be 'only dreams'. So it is a good man who follows the prompting of a mere dream to do a good thing, and a costly good thing – for in following the prompting of the dream, and in taking Jesus as his son, Joseph risks transforming what would have been Mary's disgrace into ridicule and derision directed at him, the doubtful father of this doubtful child. But this risk Joseph takes – at the prompting of a mere dream. And the prompting of dreams is not yet over and done – for again, on the strength of a dream (or we might better say, on the weakness of a dream), he sets out on a journey away from home, to Egypt – 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you'. He ventures in taking on the child as his own; he ventures again in fleeing by night far from his own land. For the sake of this child, he risks ridicule and loss of face; for the sake of this child, he becomes a refugee.

So what else should occur above this man, but a gravity defying circus of tumbling heavenly joy? What else should happen, but that the heavens should celebrate this shepherding of the shepherd, this human anticipation of the very work which will be undertaken by the child he presently protects? And why should we not join in this celebration, hailing Joseph as a saint – one who chooses for his vocation (and vocations are always chosen), to have a care of Christ in his earthly life.

So far so good. But what you might wonder has any of this to do with us? That Joseph has the great and noble vocation of having a care of Christ, to be his earthly father, what is that to us, we may ask ourselves? But as we do so, we surely notice that whilst Joseph is lost in troubled distraction, the Christ child looks out of the picture towards you and me, as if he is inviting at least our attention but more likely our response. But what response? What is the vocation to which that gaze summons us?

Remember that the Gospel of Matthew which begins with the story of Joseph called to shepherd the shepherd, reaches journey's end with the passion of Christ – which the tenderly sad Joseph of the picture seems to foresee. And remember too that immediately before his passion, the Christ of the Gospel, like the Christ of the picture, looks out of the story towards us, when, in his very final teaching before the events of Holy Week unfold, he tells that great parable of judgment, the story of the judgment of the nations, separated to right and left, the sheep to one side, the goats to the other. With his earthly ministry all but complete, apart from his final sacrifice and trial, Christ looks out from his own story and addresses us with this parable which tells us that the Son of Man welcomes on his right hand those who have given him food when he was hungry, drink when he was thirsty, welcome when he was a stranger, clothing when he was naked, care when he was sick, comfort when he was the prisoner. But when did we do these things the righteous ask? Or when did we not do these things, the unrighteous protest? 'Truly I tell you, when you did it, or not, to the least of these my brethren, you did it, or not, to me.' So at the culmination of his life, Christ looks out from the story and gazes on us – as he gazes on us from this picture.

One quite astonishing thing is just how very seriously that text from Matthew, the story of the sheep and goats, was taken by the early church – the early church understood and accepted that is to say, that Joseph's vocation, that of having a care of Christ, was not unique to Joseph, but was a vocation to which Christians one and all were called. Joseph was not, as you might suppose, with Mary, the last of those to have a care of Christ in his earthly life; he was rather, with Mary, the first of those to be called to that care. He was, if you like the very archetype of a saint, his sanctity not merely dazzling and extraordinary, but dazzling and exemplary. His sainthood serves not simply to invite our admiration, but as that look of Christ suggests, it serves to invite our imitation.

I used a line a while back with which I want to end now. Joseph, I said, for the sake of his child became a refugee. I say refugee – not a migrant. The word 'migrant', conjuring up the word 'migration', makes us think of the natural seasonal movements of the natural world – but Joseph's flight to Egypt was not a natural seasonal occurrence, for it was compelled by fear of persecution. No more so the journeys of the refugees to and across Europe's borders – the journeys of refugees, not migrants. And of course, just as in El Greco's great picture, we see Joseph the refugee setting out under that threatening, lowering sky, we have this summer, seen many similar pictures. We have seen fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, undertaking journeys in a world, where both literally and metaphorically, skies are heavy with clouds. We have seen faces, as in this picture, filled with apprehension, sadness and fear, touched perhaps by the tender solidarity of those united in peril and suffering.

In a Cambridge Chapel, on the first Sunday of a new year, you might think the preacher would have something clever to say, something dazzlingly intellectual. I don't. I have only the simple word of the Gospel which El Greco himself offers to us in this great picture. Joseph, on the strength of mere dreams, chose as his vocation to have a care of Christ in his earthly life – causing the heavens to open in joy. The Christ child now looks to you and me, and asks us, who will have many dreams of one sort or another, which dream we will follow, which vocation we will chose – and whether it will be to have, as the blessed Joseph had, a care of Christ in his earthly life, whether that earthly life is lived out in the poor, the sick, in prisoners or in refugees.