



*Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us*

WEEK 42

MARY & JOSEPH

OCTOBER 15-19, 2007

DAY	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i>	ABBREVIATED STUDY
Monday	Luke 13-14, Psalm 56	Matthew 1:12-25, 2:13-15, 19-23, Psalm 56
Tuesday	Luke 15-17, Psalm 57	Luke 1:26-45, Psalm 57
Wednesday	Luke 18-20, Psalm 58	Luke 2:21-52, Psalm 58
Thursday	Luke 21-22, Psalm 59	John 2:1-11, 19:23-27, Psalm 59
Friday	Luke 23-24, Psalm 60	Ephesians 3:14-21, Psalm 60

READ

Matthew 1:12-25; 2:13-15; 19-23
Psalm 56

REFLECT

Today we begin a week of reflection on the parents of Jesus, the carpenter named Joseph and his very much younger wife Mary. Since Matthew concentrates on Joseph much more than on Mary, a look at today's passages allows us to begin with Joseph.

The genealogy that Matthew gives (as that of Luke) shows that Joseph is in the lineage of the kings of Israel, and of David in particular. Although Joseph is no king, his line allows Jesus properly to be hailed as "the Son of David." (The NT does not tell us whether Mary was also a descendent of David.) At the same time, Matthew's language in 1:16 makes clear that Joseph did not father Jesus, but simply was "the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was begotten." This wording foreshadows the special circumstances of Jesus' conception, but it also foreshadows the particular awkwardness of Joseph's position as the passive husband of the virginal mother.

As a carpenter (Matt 13:55), Joseph would have been able to provide his family with a regular but not affluent living. He provided one of several specialty services necessary to what was otherwise a town of farmers. Perhaps this gave Jesus the slight distance of perspective on His fellows that is often a source of deep human insight; He certainly knew how to snag farmers with agricultural tales. But the particular characteristic that Matthew emphasizes in Joseph's role as the father of the family was his respect for the things of God. It is as a religious man that his family leadership had deepest impact.

Mary's pregnancy was the first crisis. It is well-documented that in those days a girl was betrothed when quite young to her intended husband, but that a number of years would lapse before he received her into his home as wife. Still, the bond was a legal one, and a writ of

divorce would be needed to break it. Mary became pregnant after the betrothal but while still in her parents' home, and so Joseph, "being righteous," moved to divorce her. "Righteous" is not always a positive word in the NT; it sometimes refers to the self-righteous (Mark 2:17). But here Joseph's genuine goodness is shown in his additional desire to get things done quietly. His care both for God and neighbor in this matter is clear. And it is confirmed by his unhesitating response when he learns, in a very remarkable way, that in this case God has a different plan: "Do not be afraid to receive Mary as your wife" (Matt 1:20).

The wrenching revelation of the divine conception could not have been easy on Joseph. It would not be easy for any husband, or for any family member, to have to swallow such improbable news in a matter of public knowledge. Joseph's own religious predilections had much more to do with the regular Jewish Temple and legal requirements (see also Luke 2:22, 39) than with miracles and angels. But three more times Joseph would be called upon in the same way to lead the family into safety (2:13, 19, 22). The faith that had grown in a lifetime of regular worship and discipline now also sustained him in crisis.

RESPOND

Crisis by nature is unpredictable. We may try to blunt its impact by reducing its unpredictability (as in our efforts to forestall another 9/11) but we will never eliminate crisis itself from the repertoire of life. Our topic today suggests that daily and weekly regular devotion is one of the foundational preparations for anything that life, or God, can throw at us – as Psalm 56 also teaches. If so, then surely the key is that we give our genuine "devotion" to such practices, as times when we truly encounter ourselves and our God.

PRAY

"Your vows are binding upon me, O God; I will render thank offerings to You. For You have delivered my soul from death, and my feet from stumbling. I walk before my God in the light of the living." Ps 56:12-13

- D.D.

READ

Luke 1:26-45

Psalm 57

REFLECT

Whereas Matthew focuses on Joseph's role in the story of Jesus' birth, Luke gives much more attention to Mary. On the one hand it is characteristic of Luke to draw more women into his Gospel; likely his role as a physician opened more opportunity to hear their stories. But Luke is also attentive to those who have been transformed by the touch of God, whose insignificance in society's eyes is overturned by God's grace (1 Cor 1:28-29). Mary is one such person: the poor Galilean village girl who becomes the lynchpin of God's plan of salvation.

Mary's story in Luke 1 is interwoven with the account of John the Baptist's birth to Elizabeth and Zacharias. Reading their story first, we are somewhat prepared for what will happen to Mary. For Mary, though, the visit of the angel Gabriel was literally right out of the blue. Gabriel's greetings do not calm her initial fears; in fact nowhere in this first part of the story do we find Mary rejoicing over what she hears. That she is to be the mother of the greatest ruler in Israel carries with it a series of incredible improbabilities: How would He be great? How would He attain the throne of David, defunct for 500 years? How would His reign be eternal? But she asked only the most immediate and pressing question: "How can this be, since I know no man?" The answer, that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit, left her with nothing to say except to accept or reject the call. Her acceptance of God's call places her at the heart of what it means to be a disciple.

In all of this, Mary was alone. She did not yet live with Joseph (and we saw yesterday that Joseph himself had to deal with the crisis on his own, as the Lord supported him). Gabriel, however, told her that someone else was going through something very similar. Her cousin Elizabeth's own conception – miraculous in timing, not in nature – was to

be a sign to Mary that God's promise would hold true. Luke tells us that Mary literally ran for the comfort offered her from this direction. Elizabeth too had kept out of the public eye during her pregnancy (1:24); perhaps each of the women wondered how to break the news to the other, and risk the embarrassment of having to say, "God has done this in me." In the event, it was the unborn John that expressed himself before anyone else, leaping in the womb for joy at hearing the mother of his Lord (1:44). And so before Mary spoke her news, Elizabeth could tell her she already knew it, and could commend and bless Mary for her faithfulness to God's plan. Mary stayed three months with Elizabeth, until the time for John's birth drew near, and then returned to her parents' home (1:56). What amazing fellowship these two confidantes must have had during those three months.

Mary's life would not long have the luxury of solitary moments or extended visits with such friends. We will see in tomorrow's readings that once she joined Joseph as his wife the two were inseparable in their decisions and movements together: the two became one (Gen 2: 24). Then there were the other children, the many brothers and sisters of Jesus (Matt 12:46; Mark 6:4). Mary's life would never be easy. But she had found the place of return and rest: obedience to the clear command of God.

RESPOND

As Joseph knew the strength of habitual spirituality, Mary knew the joy of commitment. Her hymn, the *Magnificat* (1:46-55), expresses the ecstasy of absolute dedication. Our Psalm today also sings this theme. We are reminded that this is one direction in which we cannot go too far: to give ourselves, heart, soul, mind, and strength, to the love of God.

PRAY

"My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast. I will sing, yes, I will sing praises. Awake, my soul, awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn!" (Psalm 57:7-8)

- D.D.

READ

Luke 2:21-52

Psalm 58

REFLECT

The second chapter of Luke begins with the story of the birth of Jesus and the events of His infancy and childhood. Of course Mary is very much a part of things. But what is remarkable is the way that she and Joseph appear as one unit, and do things in concert together as a couple. Their names, for instance, are hardly mentioned; they are now “his parents” (2:27, 41, 43) or just “they” (2:22, 39, 44-48, 50) or “his father and mother” (2:33).

And what is it they do together? The short answer is that they do what is right for their child. Luke is careful to explain that their arrival in the Temple shortly after Jesus’ birth was to observe the stipulations of the Law. For Christians reading the story, the significance verges on irony: the Son of God dedicated at the Temple of God! But Luke’s point is that no religious requirement was ignored. The one who would transform the world really did come from a fully Jewish background; and that included the benefit of the Law, and of conscientious Jewish parents.

It is literally in the midst of the parents’ rather prosaic observance of the Law that they encounter two prophetic personalities. The clash between the orderly obedience to the letter and the dramatic prophetic recognition is remarkable. But it is not coincidental: God is the God both of the Law and the prophets. Simeon and Anna are there in the Temple because they have been drawn in their old age to a life of special dedication to God (2:27, 37). The parental couple has come to observe the commandments of God. And God takes the moment to affirm and confirm, to fulfill and to promise, to reward and to bless. It is a powerful reminder that whereas God’s call to obedience is clear, the ways He shall *reward* obedience are truly beyond predicting, or even imagining (1 Cor 2:9).

The account of the Passover trip to Jerusalem twelve years later – customary for this observant family (2:41-42) – again shows the unity of the couple, this time in the face of one of those parental moments of panic common to any family. The family is at a later stage; Jesus is out of swaddling clothes and prefers to fend for himself. His parents have accommodated to this, but are now caught off guard by how bold their young boy has become: no longer satisfied to hang out with cousins, He has headed for the Temple itself, to see what goes on there. And He has actually succeeded in enjoying Himself, and impressing others. Mary’s question to Him is the accusation of a distracted parent, and she chides him with both her anguish and *his father’s* (2:48). So complete was the commitment of this couple to the normalcy of parenthood that they did not (immediately?) understand the point of Jesus’ response.

One interesting question: Was Joseph Jesus’ father? Twice Luke tells us that he was, once quoting Mary herself (2:33, 48). It doesn’t detract from Jesus’ divine begetting, but it does underline the faithfulness of Joseph’s day-to-day care and love. In our day and age when families are more and more irregular in composition, this is good news for those who do the parenting. If we father or mother, we *are* a father or a mother – the Lord helping us.

RESPOND

Mary and Joseph have been the focus of much idealizing as a couple. Our passage makes clear, though, that the heart of their success was dedication to the Lord, devotion to their child, and partnership with each other in the tasks that presented themselves. Such basic commitments produce results that are beyond predicting, or even imagining.

PRAY

Lord, Thank you today for those who have given themselves to us to help us grow in knowledge of You – whether parents, teachers, pastors, family, friends, or others. Help us today in our commitments to those closest to us, and to all those we encounter as we go.

- D.D.

READ

John 2:1-11; 19:23-27

Psalm 59

REFLECT

The Gospel of John provides the broadest picture we have of Mary in the time after Jesus began to preach. Because none of the Gospels mention Joseph after the pilgrimage to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12, the assumption is that he died between that time and the start of Jesus' ministry some 18 years later,

John relates the account of the wedding at Cana of Galilee as the first of the signs of Jesus (2:11). In fact, turning water into wine is unique in the stories we have about Jesus, and would seem to have little to do with His message of the kingdom of God. Why did He perform it? The answer is that His mother got Him to. The interchanges between Mary and Jesus in this passage give commentators a hard time, because they are enigmatic and seem harsh. Mary brings to Jesus' attention the need for more wine. Why? If He has not yet performed signs, does she expect an actual miracle, or a trip to the local wine shop? Most likely, she had a habit of turning to her oldest son in moments of need, a habit which was evidently justified by His ability to get things done even in normal ways. His answer is sharp, and hangs in ambiguity between the frank and the insulting: "Woman, what has it got to do with me?" His reply is a rejection of her push to get Him involved: "My hour has not yet come" implies that He knows more than she does about the things He needs to give His attention to. Nevertheless, rejecting her, He complies, as she again simply takes the initiative in readying the servants for action. And indeed wine is procured.

The exchanges probably only make sense in the context of the long and intimate relationship of a mother and her eldest child. If the story of the boy in the Temple shows us the tensions of Jesus testing family boundaries, this story shows us the other end of the process, as Mary uses a mother's prerogative to intrude upon the independence of her

grown son. What picture results? One of healthy relationships, frank give-and-take, a family's commitment to neighbors and their joy, and a young man successfully negotiating the pull of the past and the call of the future.

In the final depiction of Mary in the Gospel, the relationship comes full circle (19:23-27). Here is Jesus dying on the Cross, to all appearances as complete a failure as any son could be. And yet seeing His mother, He takes the opportunity in the midst of His most important work to ensure her comfort in old age. We hear again the sharp candor of "Woman!" and we see again the deft touch of the Man who is able to get things done: He draws her into new relationship with His closest companion, so that "from that hour the disciple took her into his own household" (19:27).

It is hard to see here an *idealized* family; rather, it is a *particular* family – one we can relate to, however, even given the differences of personality and circumstance. And the principles that seem to be at work here are very much accessible to us all: frank communication and real mutual respect, along with an instinctive agreement about the most important thing: to love God with all we are, and to extend that love to family, friends, and neighbors.

RESPOND

The families we grow up in are no doubt the training grounds for other relationships. Some of us find that we have gained much that is positive; others of us would rather leave behind more than we probably can. But relationships are basic to all human fruitfulness, and the good news is that relationships that have God's love at their center can be transformed and redeemed. It may take the help of a professional, but respect, appropriate communication, and especially God's love are within reach of any family in need.

PRAY

Lord, Thank You for the love You bear for us: personal, rich, uncompromising. Help me share Your love today.

- D.D.

READ

Ephesians 3:14-21

Psalm 60

REFLECT

The idealization of “the Holy Family” in Christian tradition is pretty rampant, and I have been surprised while writing these reflections at how little of it we see in the Bible. It has prompted me to close this week with some thoughts on the family in general. Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3 gives us an opportunity, with its exalted mention of “family.”

Paul’s prayer is one of strength for the Ephesian church, in the context of his world-wide mission on behalf of Christ. The Greek word translated here as “family” (*patria*) occurs only two other places in the NT. One is at Acts 3:25, which quotes the OT promise that in Abraham’s seed “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” It is a very apt echo for Paul as he is affirming his ministry to the Gentile world: in Genesis 12:3 God promises that in His covenant with Abraham He will not stop until God’s blessings come to every family of the world. The other place the word is used is at Luke 2:4, taking us back to the Christmas story: Joseph took his pregnant wife to Bethlehem for the census “because he was of the house and family of David.” The three uses of this one word in the NT are somewhat coincidental, but they make the point that it was through this one Israelite family that God brought salvation to the families of the world.

Paul’s prayer invokes “the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” Why does he pray this way? First, in Paul’s care for the world and for Ephesus, he is giving a huge place to the institution of the family. Our culture tends to have a more individualistic mindset when we think about the mass of humanity; but Paul has a good biblical basis for regarding the family, rather than just the individual, as the basic building block of society. It serves as a healthy reminder not to underestimate the power of family.

Second, the strength that Paul asks for the Ephesians is the kind of strength that can only be nurtured in family-type groups – really requiring the closely-knit commitment that family nurtures. It is rooted in love (which last I looked required company), and it grows in an understanding held in common by “all the saints” (3:18). The results bloom as what Paul describes as “glory in the Church” (3:21).

Paul’s prayer for the church family at Ephesus corresponds in many ways to what we have seen in the family of Joseph and Mary. Of first importance is the Lord’s active work, and our focus on the Lord (3:14-15). The inward commitment of each family member (3:16) is echoed in that of others, and it allows us to be “rooted and grounded” in actual love rather than theory (3:17). Experiencing family life that is touched by God, we are able to move beyond family “with all the saints” to share in the knowledge of goodness and grace which is the testimony of the faithful (3:18-19). And the result will be, not glory to a family, but glory to God (3:20-21).

Families are notoriously imperfect, and even brand new marriages are laden with all kinds of baggage – as we saw in the case of Mary and Joseph. They remind us, too, that families are often irregular; Jesus was Joseph’s adoptive son. None of this affects the importance in which God holds families, whatever their particular permutations. His desire and His ability to work in families is huge.

RESPOND

What is the family relationship that is causing the most frustration for you today? What one step or action of your own could help bring God’s grace to bear on it?

PRAY

Lord, We thank you that we have You as a Father, and Jesus as a brother. Thank you for family, and the assurance that You care deeply about family.

- Dave Dorman

