

JOSEPH, THE JUST

By FR. K.K. JOHN PHILADELPHIA

Key verse: "Then Joseph her husband, being a just [man], and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily." [Matthew 1:19]

Christmas thought brings to our mind the characters that played different rolls in the first Christmas. Should I include Triune God in the list is tenuous question! God the Father when it pleased Him initiates "In the fullness of time" the process of redemption first in the unseen realm. The Most High God overshadowed Virgin Mary, Lk 1:35. God the Son emptied Himself from the bosom of God the Father and assumed in the womb of a mortal, Virgin Mary. Holy Spirit came upon, sanctified and filled Virgin Mary, Lk 1:35. This is the most significant verse in the whole of Bible because it records how Holy Trinity manifested on the special occasion heralding a new beginning;

Holy Spirit will come upon you,
Most High will overshadow you,
Holy One who is born will be called, Son of God.
These are synonyms of the One God, Holy Trinity.

God employed whole creations; seen and unseen, spirit and material, inanimate and animate, born and unborn, young and old, Gentiles and Jews, agnostics and believers, scholars and stupid, rich and poor, the just and the cruel, natives and foreigners, ruler and outcasts, meek and the powerful to participate in the first Christmas.

Archangel Gabriel announces the good news unraveling God's plan, Lk 1: 28.

Virgin Mary receives and faithfully responds, Lk, 1:27.

Unborn, John the Baptist, in his mother's womb rejoices hearing Mary's salutation.

Elizabeth, Virgin Mary's relative, conceived in old age, salutes and proclaims to the world that Mary is 'Mother of humanity,' Lk 1:43.

Joseph, betrothed husband of Mary, is privileged to foster the Incarnate Word of God by divine provision, Mat 1: 24.

Augustus Caesar, Roman Emperor decrees census, which fulfills a prophecy concerning Savior's birth in Bethlehem, Lk 2:1-5. Unknowing he becomes part of the plan rather, God used him.

The Angels, Mat 1:20, Lk 2:10, Lk 2:13-14, Mat 2:13 Mat 2:19-20.

The mute and dumb animals, ox and ass, first witnessed the unprecedented event. Jules Supervielle weaves a fascinating discourse, how the ox and ass in the manger felt the wondrous child. The ox feels complaisant that its breath gave warmth to the newborn before Joseph brings swaddling clothe to wrap the child. The ass feels having done a great service to the holy family. Sense of duty of both to protect the infant from insects and beasts captivates our imagination. Though fiction, "The ox and the ass at the manger," in the book, "The Greatest Bible Stories" imply that the animal world rejoiced at first Christmas.

Among the human beings the lowly and outcast shepherds were privileged to first witness the Divine Birth, Lk 2:15.

Star guided wise men from the East, Mat 2:2.

Wise men from the East worship the Child Jesus and abide by the divine revelation, Mat 2:12.

Simeon, the just and devout old man takes up infant Jesus in his arms and declares that he saw the 'Salvation of the Lord' and predicts that the child will be the Light to the Gentiles and Glory of Israel, Lk 2: 29-32.

Anna, the old prophetess upon seeing infant Jesus glorifies God and speaks of Him to those looked for the redemption of Jerusalem, Lk 2: 32-38.

King Herod, out of fear and conceit shows interest to see the child. Later he orders infanticide to fulfill another prophesy, Mat 2:16.

Infants put to death by royal decree, Mat 2:16, fulfills another prophesy. "The Last Visitor," story in the same book narrates the visit of an old wrinkled lady and presenting a red apple to the Newborn. The old lady was Eve and the apple she gave was the first sin alluding that Eve knew Jesus was to take away her sin.

In short, whole creation and generation from Adam were sentient of the great redemption through the new born Jesus. They took part and rejoiced in the advent. Let us meditate on the qualities of Joseph for it is worth. Joseph is the most blessed saint next only to St Mary. He was blessed with the rarest privilege of being the protector of Holy Mother and the Holy Redeemer. How awesome,

God the Father appointed him to act as His emissary on earth. What we know about this exceptional saint from Bible is; he was descendant of David, Mat 1:20, a carpenter, Mat 13:55, a "just" man, Mat 1:19, lived in Nazareth, Lk 2:4, devout Jew, Lk 2:41, A law abiding citizen, and affectionate father to young Jesus.

We have to read Gospels of Mathew and Mark together to properly discern Joseph's role. Both Gospels identify Joseph as the espoused husband of Virgin Mary, Mat 1:18, Lk 1:27. After Joseph's vision, Rev Charles P Roney says, "Marriage was quickly solemnized according to the law of the Jews," "Beautiful Bible Stories," page 568. His version contradicts Luke 2:5 that says "Mary was betrothed wife," when they registered for census in Bethlehem. It seems they neither married nor came together ever-after. Living together without marriage was common among Jews though not ethically accepted, John 4:18. Mathew does not record annunciation. Luke does not record Joseph doubting and revelation that followed. Joseph and Mary together set journey to Bethlehem to register for census, Lk 2:4. Joseph was with Mary when "She brought forth her first-born, v7, Heb 1:6. Luke does not mention whether or not Joseph was present when Jesus was named, v21. Mathew fills this blank saying the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told, "You shall call His name Jesus," Mat 1:21. Verse 24 says Joseph obeyed the angel. Mathew records that Joseph fled to Egypt with Mary and child and protected Jesus from infanticide Herod ordered and took them back to Nazareth, 2:13-23.

Luke records that Joseph and Mary together took infant Jesus to the temple for dedication and they marveled at the extraordinary prophecy of Simeon. Both Mathew and Luke agree that the Holy family settled in Nazareth, v23, Lk 2:39. While Mathew attributes it to fulfill a prophecy, "He shall be called a Nazarene," which is unclear in the available Old Testament text, Luke is specific that Nazareth was the home town of Joseph. Luke says that Joseph and Mary were very religious and strictly observed all the rituals. All pious Jews visited Jerusalem temple during Passover Feast. They took Jesus to temple when he was 12 years old. Jews reckoned twelve years as adulthood, eligible to study the Law. Weighing from all angles, Joseph performed all human duties honestly beyond reproach. Returning from Passover, Jesus subjected to parents, Lk 2:51 and continued to obey ever-after. Luke dispels doubts about Joseph's fatherhood; hidden from the public for safety, "As was supposed, the son of Joseph," Lk 3:23. Joseph passed away before Jesus began public ministry but we do not know when.

It is difficult to construct the full role of Joseph as a husband and father from the bible. Here comes the aid of tradition and apocryphal scriptures. Apocrypha means hidden. Books of doubtful authorship, some contained heretical teaching, were not canonized. Not that they are divinely inspired but certain contents are acceptable and have been blended in our traditions. "Proto-evangelium" known

after St James and "History of Joseph the Carpenter" give details. James, it is said, had the information directly from St Mary. Mary became temple inmate at the age 3. When she reached the age of puberty, the high-priest wanted to send her away in marriage. Mary's modesty and blameless conduct made him invite all widowers in Judea. Mary was to be given in marriage to one whose wand blossomed. Joseph married at the age of 40, had 6 children and was widowed after 49 years. His wand blossomed. So the high-priest chose Joseph to be the husband of Mary. He was reluctant at first but gave in to the will of God. He knew through vision, the time of his death and died at the age of 111, when Jesus was 22 years old. Before death Joseph confessed his sins to Jesus for doubting the Virgin and disciplining the boy-Jesus and asked forgiveness. Mary pleaded with Jesus to spare the life of Joseph. Jesus tried to prevent the angels but God the Father forbid Jesus. The terrified angels wrapped the body in linen. Jesus performed last rites with water and oil and buried the body in the presence of people. Jesus promised that the body will not decay until Millennium rule begins. People who remember him, or perform acts of mercy in his memory or name the children, Joseph shall be blessed, etc.

Joseph treasured many good qualities worth emulating. His anxiety was genuine and yet he did not rebuke Mary. His moral rectitude disallowed a compromise with immorality and yet did not want to put Mary, a defenseless maiden in harms way. At the same time highly perplexed Joseph went to sleep with a heavy heart doubting and poised to secretly cast away the Virgin. God interferes in defense of Mary. Having seen the vision, he woke up as a new being completely relieved of all doubts and fully convinced of the Virgin's chastity and fidelity. Like Simeon he was looking forward the redemption of Israel. He underwent a thorough transformation, which is true Christian experience. His resolve to submit to the will of God outweighed human frailty. He did not care what people would talk about him. Only a man of high nobility and integrity could decide future relying on a dream. He confronted all obstacles with equanimity. By all standards Joseph was 'saint of saints'. May his intercession be a strong hold to us!