

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT; DECEMBER 22, 2019

From her own conception Mary was prepared to provide the most august service ever asked of a human being. Immaculately conceived in the womb of her mother Anne, it would have been apparent early that God had designs upon her life. At a young age she was presented in the Temple for consecration as a virgin and for education in divine service. In her teens she was betrothed to Joseph, a righteous man and a widower in need of help in caring for his children. Though of age Mary was nonetheless in need of a guardian to safeguard her vows and provide for her needs. Soon after the betrothal, she was visited by the Archangel Gabriel and told just which calling was now being asked of her. Unlike Eve Mary acceded to the divine request and hastened to share the Good News with her cousin Elizabeth. As the *mater Dei* Mary was appropriately greeted and acknowledged as the Ark of the New Covenant.

We tend to take this news of pregnancy with a detachment born of the separation of centuries and the routine of religion. For Joseph however, the news precipitated a crisis of faith which moved through two distinct stages whose transit helped prepare him for his own divine calling. First, no doubt assuming that Mary had violated her vow, he was faced with three unhappy choices: public censure which would involve both divorce and punishment, a 'private' divorce, or continuing in the betrothal by effectively "looking the other way." He chose the second of these and by so doing demonstrated his commitment to justice, but of a type open to mercy and understanding.

By so choosing he passed an important initial test, for the other two options would have lacked either mercy or justice respectively. So vetted, he is then visited by an angel in a dream. Therein it is revealed to him that all of this is of God's design and that Mary is with child of the Holy Spirit. By accepting this truth as revealed, his faith is deepened but his suffering increased since others will now likely assume that Mary is with child out-of-wedlock. As a result, both will be tainted as sinners and face some degree of the eviscerating tongue-wagging inflicted by local gossips. Jesus himself would most likely have grown up with this low rumble percolating in the background effectively questioning his legitimacy.

What surely looked from a distance like a Christmas scene nicely evocative of the later work of Thomas Kincaid, was in fact from the beginning overshadowed by the cross. Mother, guardian father and child, so peacefully assembled in the stable, are in fact all under doom. This must be, for Jesus himself like his mother and earthly father had a sober mission to undertake, one that necessitated his torture and death for the salvation of the world. Decades later when their son's service is finally completed on the Hill of the Skull, only then will all three come to the joy of that new creation as foreshadowed by the Lord's nativity in Bethlehem.