

Tenderness and Trust
Advent 4, Year A
19 December 2010

Why won't brides get the message about being given away? For over a decade I have been telling them that it is a barbaric, Dark Age custom from the days when women were seen as pieces of property to be passed from one family to another. I point out to them that the Church has dropped the question, "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" But they just ignore the past 100 years of feminist thought and practice. The fact is that the brides of today have reinterpreted this custom in terms of the mysterious dynamics of father-daughter relationships. Fixing me with an obstinate stare they say, "Dad would be upset. I want this to happen."

The strangeness of marriage customs as they change and evolve over time is brought home to us as we consider how Joseph and Mary got together. Their marriage would very probably have been arranged. They would have been very young by our standards. The minimum age to get engaged was thirteen for a male and twelve for a female.

By the time we pick up the story they would already have passed through a betrothal ceremony. This would have taken place at the home of the father of the bride. Joseph would have presented Mary and her father with the marriage contract, and the so-called bride price. There would have been a delay of a year or two before the actual marriage ceremony. The marriage ceremony consisted in the transfer of the bride from her father's home to the groom's house. In those days marriage was understood more as a legal contract rather than as a religious ritual or a sacrament.

Today's gospel reading is set in the in between time, when Mary is living at her parents home, and Joseph is visiting the household from time to time. The dilemma facing this couple has a resonance for people living in the Middle East today. We are shocked to hear that in societies living under Sharia law you can be stoned to death for committing adultery. Mary's pregnancy at first sight appears to be the case outlined in Deuteronomy 22: 23-27 which involves a betrothed virgin who had sexual relations with either a man in the city or a man in the country. In the first case the penalty is death for both parties, in the second case only for the man. The reason for the difference concerns the woman's ability to cry out and stop an act of rape; in the city she would be heard but not in the country.

Despite his confusion and hurt Joseph is intent on preventing this barbaric legal procedure being put into operation. Divorcing Mary

quietly is the only way he can think of to save her life, and to contain any scandalous information disclosure.

Another and better way is suggested to Joseph in a dream. Since Jung and his thinking became en courant we moderns have become accustomed to thinking of dreams as a way of interpreting the past and the present. But people who lived in biblical times saw dreams as a way of making sense of the future. So Joseph is prepared to take this message on trust. These teenagers, wise beyond their years, proceed to marriage intent on working their way through a most extraordinary situation that nothing in their background would have prepared them for. So began a momentous partnership.

Why have I dwelt on these Middle Eastern marriage customs of long ago? We live in a time when the desolating plague of divorce has spread everywhere in society. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why many young adults live together rather than marry. Yet even these limited liability arrangements do not prevent the sadness and disappointment that ensue when intimate friendships that at first seemed to promise so much fail. It is an age when so much emotional pain has generated a great deal of suspicion between men and women. People are losing faith in the power of enduring relationships, and in the capacity of men and women to please each other. They lower their sights, and harden their hearts. As a woman friend of mine would often say to me, "Men and women weren't really built to be together for any length of time. When the magic and the mystery begins to wear off it's time to cut your losses and run."

In the face of this kind of cynicism it is helpful to recall those famous words from the *Desiderata*:

Never be cynical about love, for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is as perennial as the grass.

Joseph and Mary won through despite all the unpromising background factors that didn't exactly set them up for a marriage made in heaven. Joseph is the hero of this morning's story. He refuses to abandon Mary to the tribal vengeance of Israel's past. He is instantly ready to believe the best about her when an alternative view is offered of her startling circumstances. And he then sets about running for the Dad of the year award even though the child is not his. In his quiet, unremarkable way this is someone who enables the promises of the prophets to come true.

What is more this couple, as they face the ups and downs ahead of them, encourage us to believe that men and women were made to live together in relationships of tenderness and trust. That is the way things were

meant to be. That is what is perfectly possible for people in every age and place. Even if we have been disappointed in love and marriage that doesn't mean we can extrapolate out from that experience to predict that fate for everyone else. There are couples around who have, and are making each other happy and fulfilled.

However the story of Mary and Joseph as it is proposed to us this morning is not about a couple who were just lucky in love. Rather it is about two people whose lives were shaped by God in such a way that they would be available to one another to help each other through this momentous partnership. And of course their lives together are determined right from the beginning by their openness to a third party whose arrival will reveal the reason why they are together. This is a marriage based not around their needs and desires but rather around their temporary stewardship of the one who came from the glorious kingdom. It is a marriage that works because it is based on something other than just them.

In my office there is a copy of Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity. The three winged figures sit around a table in deep concord as they commune together about the wonderful way that they will rescue and restore the human race. What we see in this icon is in fact what they have in mind for us. We are to start reflecting back this quality of love in our circles of affinity and kinship. And that is the real significance of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. The love of the Trinity made its home in this threesome. They are the first human reflection of the Trinity. Their life together is based around the life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in their life together.