

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

SUNDAY, JANUARY 6, 2019

Merry Christmas! And Happy New Year. New Year is often a time of looking ahead and making resolutions and setting some goals for the coming year. Before we do that, though, let us consider again the Holy Family. We know they are an example to us of listening to God and seeking to do his will in all things. But what was that like? Whenever we begin to think of the Christmas story, our thoughts probably turn to Bethlehem. But the story actually began nine months earlier in Nazareth....

The angel Gabriel stood before the young teenager trembling with excitement and yes, a little fear, as he waited for her answer. But Mary was confused. "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" she asked. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..." the angel replied. Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word." We have heard this so often we probably give it little thought. It sounds so simple. The angel asked, Mary said yes, Christ was born, and Mary became the mother of God. Life, as we know, is rarely simple or easy. If Mary was confused when Gabriel first appeared, imagine what it would have been like after he left.

As her pregnancy progressed, it became increasingly difficult to keep it hidden. By the time of the census, it had to have been very obvious. Imagine the comments, the sidelong glances, and all the shame piled on when others questioned her character. Mary could have even been ostracized in her hometown because of her pregnancy. The shame Mary endured may have been very similar to what some women go through today who are in crisis pregnancies. How do we treat them? How would we have treated Mary and her family? If we think of her as a teenage girl in a difficult situation, it may open our hearts to show compassion to women in need. Without approving of the wrong choices made, we can still reach out with the truth of God's love and care for every person. It is easy today to choose abortion. Society approves of it and makes it readily available. More than just available, there is often pressure to choose abortion as the only logical choice. Those women who choose life may face a difficult future of raising their child without the help and support of family or husband. They are in great need of our support and compassion.

It was also difficult for Joseph. Imagine him working the family carpenter business, trying to save as much as possible as he looked forward to a wife and family of his own. And now this! When Joseph discovered Mary's pregnancy, he reacted as any man would. He assumed his bride-to-be was unfaithful! He knew he wasn't the father! Because of his moral standards, he clearly would not go through with the marriage. His beloved bride-to-be had chosen another, so be it. But because of his love and kindness, he could not bear the thought of shaming her publicly (a common practice in those days). Nor could he demand her death, as provided by the law. He had been shamed, but he did not respond with anger. His concern was not for himself, but for Mary.

God intervenes by sending the angel, telling Joseph to take Mary home as his wife. Matthew makes it a point to tell us that Joseph awoke and immediately followed his instructions. It is important to note the difference between marriage then and now. In Joseph's day, the betrothal (engagement) was in some ways more important than the actual marriage ceremony. The betrothal signified the successful completion of negotiations between the fathers of the bride and groom. It was legally binding. The groom took legal possession of the bride. She was his wife. He was responsible for her. She belonged to him, not her father. Yet they did not live together. The physical consummation of the relationship was strictly prohibited until the completion of a second ceremony that celebrated the new marriage. There is no indication in the bible of when or if this happened. Perhaps they had a quiet, private ceremony because of Mary's pregnancy. If all this was difficult for Mary and Joseph and their families, so too it would prove to be hard for Jesus as well. More on that next week...

Fr. Tom