

Evening Prayer Reflection April 22, 2008

Most fathers learn a good deal about fatherhood from the mere fact of their biological connection to their children. For those of us who become fathers in other ways—you, me—we have to begin elsewhere. On this mark, the culture offers us no shortage of images of the father.

One image is the “Father Knows Best” image. You know the trope; it was popularized by the 1950s suburban domestic comedies...shows like *Leave it To Beaver*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, and of course, *Father Knows Best*. This is the man who is king of his castle, captain of his ship, governor of the well-ordered home. His virtues are equanimity, sensibleness, and constancy. He wears these virtues like he wears his neatly pressed suits—at all times and in all places, even while cutting the grass!

There is much to admire about this common sense man of strength. And we need his virtues to have good homes and good neighborhoods, to feel safe in our world and to have the freedom to find our place within it. But I think that Christ asks more of us.

In my office above my desk is a print of a painting by Luc Olivier Merson entitled “Rest on the Flight into Egypt.” It offers a different image of fatherhood—one that I find more realistic and compelling.

The painting depicts Joseph as a man who has spent himself entirely. Collapsed in the desert sand, he sleeps at the foot of an Egyptian sphinx, in whose forelegs sleeps Mary, the infant Jesus cradled in her lap. The infinite blackness of the desert night engulfs them; the only source of light is the supernatural radiance of the child.

As I gaze upon this image of Joseph, what stands out for me is not his strength but his weakness, his vulnerability, his utter dependence upon God.

The gospel of Matthew depicts Joseph as a man of humble receptivity. This is not the man of common sense rationality, nor even the man who takes his marching orders from the religious law. He is, rather, a man so attuned to and hungry for the subtle movements of God within his life that he is able to discern the call of God in something as ordinary as a dream. He is a man so deeply aware of God’s loving fidelity that he is willing to throw himself completely into a cosmic drama that exceeds his understanding and that will demand much more of him than he knows he possesses.

A prudent man could be forgiven for saying, “I’m not up to raising the Messiah or becoming a political refugee or repatriating to the land that tried to kill my son.” But Joseph does not run from his poverty. Rather, he entrusts it to God as an instrument of God’s saving activity in the world. That’s what makes Joseph the significant figure in Matthew’s infancy narrative. He is the first example of the higher righteousness that Matthew’s Jesus preaches. His is the character that is described by the beatitudes. He is salt for the earth, and light for the world.

Theologian Johannes Metz: “To become human means to become poor, to have nothing that one might brag about before God. To become human means to have no support and no power, save the enthusiasm and commitment of one’s own heart. Becoming human involves proclaiming the poverty of the human spirit in the face of the total claims of a transcendent God” (*Poverty of Spirit*, 10)

I find in my own experience of fatherhood that the greatest temptation I face—outside of dropping the kids off at the grandparents and entering the witness relocation program—is to run from my poverty.

A father’s poverty, it seems to me, takes many forms. There is the poverty of *finitude*—I do not possess within myself the resources I need to raise my children in a manner that is worthy of their dignity. There is the poverty of *embodiment*—I am not pure spirit. I cannot enter into the minds of my children and control their thinking, desiring and acting. Nor can I take flight when my sensing overwhelms me—I cannot not hear the screaming of our boy at three in the morning; I cannot not be affected by the realities of my historical and social existence. And there is the poverty of *incommunicability*—I cannot communicate to my children the breadth and depth of my love for them. The greater measure of what I do for them, of who I am in relation to them, will always remain in the background, anonymous, like Joseph who is denied any speaking role in the gospels and who disappears altogether after the infancy narratives.

All too easily, I find that I try to run away from these poverties. I act as if I am infinite—an infinite font of love, of wisdom, of power, patience, and compassion. I run from the fact of my embodiment by avoiding the difficult work of being fully present to my children, of being at home in my world. I fail to accept the incommunicability of my love by expecting a return on my investment and, perhaps in ways that I am not even aware, conditioning my love upon that return.

Precisely to the extent I give in to these temptations, I deny my poverty. I hide myself from God. I put up walls to the transforming work of grace, and in so doing I limit what I might otherwise be and do for my children.

Metz: “Only through poverty of spirit do we draw near to God; only through it does God draw near to us. Poverty of spirit is the meeting point of heaven and earth, the mysterious place where God and humanity encounter each other, the point where infinite mystery meets concrete existence” (*Poverty of Spirit*, 21)

Brothers, on this night, let us ask St. Joseph to pray for us that we might be truly poor, that we might bring our poverty to our relationship with God and to our work as fathers, so that, like Joseph, we too may be light for the world.