

Vigil of the Lord's Nativity - Perpetual Virginity of BVM

In the name of the Father ...

Joseph son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife.

During Advent, St John the Baptist, *the voice of one crying in the desert*, exhorts us to *make straight the way of the Lord*, i.e., to amend our lives.¹ He also cautions: *in your midst stands one whom you do not know*,² calling us to reflect on the Incarnation, God's Eternal Word entering his own creation.

These two – *penitence* and *contemplation* – are coordinated. For sin darkens the intellect and turns the will away from God, but by works of mortification, the blinding legacy of sin is slowly extirpated, and the will is turned back to God that we might fix our gaze upon Him.

In addition to contemplating the Incarnation, we also are called to reflect on those privileges of the Blessed Virgin most intimately associated with it: her divine maternity; her Immaculate Conception and perfect sinlessness; her perpetual virginity. Thus, from the Compline hymn for this season – the *Alma Redemptoris Mater* – we have: *tu quae genuisti, natura mirante, tuum sanctum genitorem; virgo prius ac posterius* – while creation marvelled, you bore your creator; a virgin before and after.

Relating the experiences of St Joseph, St Matthew's gospel stresses Our Lady's perpetual virginity through allusions to Old Testament episodes.

Through Joseph's dreams, Matthew calls to mind the 'patriarch' Joseph who also went down into Egypt, who - first by Potiphar, then by Pharaoh himself - was trusted and set over his master's affairs, and who was perfectly chaste: he would not be with his master's wife.³

Matthew then recalls the Exodus from Egypt.⁴ On Mount Horeb, God called Moses from the midst of a burning bush: *And [Moses] looked, and behold, the bush was burning yet it was not consumed*, prefiguring the virginal conception.⁵ When God informed him that ... *the place on which you are standing is holy ground ... Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look upon God*.⁶

Again on Horeb, God instructed Moses to build the Ark to bear the tablets which God would give to him ... *the two tablets of the covenant... written with the finger of God*,⁷ prefiguring the Incarnation and the divine maternity, the very Word of God written by the Holy Ghost in human flesh in the womb of the Virgin. The Ark was covered inside and out with pure gold, signifying sinlessness.

Finally, God instructed Moses: *You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. And*

¹ [Jn 1: 23](#) – Gospel for Third Sunday in Advent

² [Jn 1:26](#) – *ibid.*

³ [Gen 39; 41](#); esp [39:6-20](#)

⁴ [Mt 2:13-15](#)

⁵ [Ex 3:1-2](#); [Mt 1:23](#) – [Isa 7:14](#)

⁶ [Ex 3:5-6](#)

⁷ [Ex 31:18](#)

*you shall ... carry the Ark by them ... they shall not be taken from it.*⁸

The Ark was born upon poles so that no man should touch it. When King David sought to bring the Ark to Jerusalem, God killed Uzzah for daring to lay a hand on the Ark: *And David was afraid of the Lord that day ... so David was not willing to take the Ark of the Lord into the city of David.*⁹

Matthew's genealogy compares ... *David the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah* and ... *Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.*¹⁰ David was the biological father of Solomon, but Solomon's mother was not his wife. Mary was the wife of Joseph, but he was not the biological father of her child.

Matthew continues: *When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Ghost,*¹¹ again stressing that Joseph was not the biological father, but that the child was formed – in fulfilment of the tablets resting in the Ark – by the finger of God.

Indeed, that ... *she was found to be with child of the Holy Ghost ...* is not parenthetical but, as St Jerome notes, the situation confronting Joseph. Like Moses before the Burning Bush, Joseph seeing his wife with child and her virginity not consumed, recognized that he was standing on holy ground and ... *was afraid to look upon the face of the Lord.* And like his forbear King David, Joseph, being afraid ... *was not willing to take the Ark of the Lord into his home.* Joseph feared God. It is in this context that the angel of the Lord appeared to him: *Joseph son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife.*¹²

That this was the case is only reinforced by Matthew describing Joseph as *a just man*,¹³ i.e., conformed to God's law, which prescribed exacting punishment for adultery. If Joseph suspected his wife and then tried to circumvent the law, he could not be just. Rather, in his *humility*, Joseph sought to withdraw.

Matthew concludes: *But he knew her not until she had born a son.*¹⁴ In their temerity, many moderns claim that the virginal relationship between Joseph and Mary changed after Our Lord's birth. This, however, contradicts the Fathers and the unchanging teaching of the Church. Indeed, commenting on this very issue, St Jerome notes that Matthew's intention is to state only what did not happen. To assert a change also is contrary to the sense of the scriptures. For when King David finally brought the Ark to Jerusalem, his wife Michal mocked him. For this she was cursed: *And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child until the day of her death.*¹⁵ Clearly, Michal did not then start bearing children.¹⁶ God ordered Moses to make poles that no man should touch the

⁸ [Ex 25:12-15](#)

⁹ [2 Sam 6:3, 6-9](#)

¹⁰ [Mt 1:6 & 16](#)

¹¹ [Mt 1:18](#)

¹² [Mt 1:24](#)

¹³ [Mt 1:19](#)

¹⁴ [Mt 1:25](#)

¹⁵ [2 Sam 6:23](#)

¹⁶ c.f. also [Mt 1:17](#) in the genealogy of the Christ: *The generations from Abraham until David were fourteen generations ...* If this signalled a radical change was about to happen, there would be no further generations. In each of these expressions about Michal, Babylon and Joseph with Mary, it is the same Greek word which is used which indicates only

Ark of God, prefiguring Our Lady's perpetual virginity, that ... *it shall not be taken from her.*

Through Joseph's experiences, Matthew forcefully tells of Our Lady's perpetual virginity. Like the 'patriarch', Joseph was trusted and set over his master's affairs; he was chaste and would not be with his master's wife. He was entrusted with the Ark of God which was not to be touched by man. Like Moses before the burning bush, when presented with the virginal conception, that his wife ... *was found to be with child of the Holy Ghost ... Joseph ... hid his face for he was afraid to look upon God.* Like his ancestor King David, he ... *was afraid of the Lord that day ... [he] was not willing to take the Ark of the Lord into his home.* And when by God's command he did ... *Joseph knew her not.* No man was to touch the Ark of God.

During Advent, St John the Baptist urges us to *make straight the way of the Lord*, but also admonishes us: *in your midst stands one whom you do not know.* Creation marvelled that a virgin bore her creator. So also did St Joseph. So should we. Let us strive to amend our lives, to *make straight the way of the Lord*, to be *just*, like Joseph. Let us strive to attain the spirit of the most chaste, God-fearing St Joseph, and with him, to contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation which God unfolded before his eyes, and desires to unfold before ours.

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a duration with no connotation of any change thereafter.