

THE FORGOTTEN FIGURE OF THE NATIVITY

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ND it came to pass that in those days, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled . . . And all went to be enrolled, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem . . . to be enrolled with Mary, his espoused wife, who was with child."¹ With this seemingly negligible mention, St. Joseph is dismissed from the most momentous scene ever enacted upon this earth. The forgotten man! If any man was ever deservedly styled 'forgotten,' it was Joseph, the humble carpenter of Nazareth.

God in His ineffable Wisdom knew that He should set the example for all mankind in the observance of His laws. He had constituted the family as the basis and foundation upon which man should build his life. Therefore it was fitting that when in the fullness of time the Son of God was to assume human form and become man, a true family should be established. In order to protect Mary and her Son from all opprobrium and shame and to assure them of proper human security and care, He would choose a husband for Mary, who would be a guardian and protector of her divine Baby. Yet, He must insist upon the divine generation of Christ, and he who would be chosen for Mary must recognize the fact that his protege was Divinity itself.

There had been many prophecies concerning the future Redeemer, and Joseph probably knew them all. As did every Jewish man, Joseph hoped that the promised Messiah would appear during his lifetime. Never did he imagine that he would dare speak to Him. What must have been his feelings when he learned that he was the husband of the woman who had been chosen as the Mother of Christ! To think that he, a poor, humble, laboring man, was to be so intimately connected with the God-man! How he must have trembled when he considered it!

Since the Evangelists have presented merely the bare essentials in the august story of the Nativity, much is left to the imagination of man. The Gospel relates that Mary and Joseph left their home in

¹ Lk. 2, 1.

Nazareth in order to comply with the edict of the Governor. Since Joseph knew well that the time for Mary's deliverance was nearly at hand, how he must have worried during that long and weary journey to Bethlehem. They were among the last of thousands to arrive, and it was evidently very late in the evening. Vainly Joseph went from door to door, seeking admission for the night. Always he received the same answer: "There is no room." Almost desperate, he finally heard of an unused stable, an abandoned cave, that he could use. Oh, what a blow to his manhood! To ask his wife not only to live in the wretched place but also to deliver her Divine Son there! If he could only find a really fitting place for the King of kings! But no, his foster-Son would not want a palace; neither would His Holy Mother. They would be content to stay anywhere, even with the animals of the field! Mary looked at Joseph with loving understanding and gratitude, and entered the stable. It seemed then to Joseph that time stood still. A tremendous mystery was now going on in that humble stable. The world was about to receive Him Whom it had awaited for thousands of years.

As Joseph remained outside, anxiously waiting for some word from Mary, what wonderful thoughts must have been his. Sadness at the pitiable plight of Mary being forced to stay in a cave, and, above all, of the God of All being forced to reside there; delight and inexplicable joy at the thought of being chosen as the protector on this earth of the God-man.

Finally the door opened, and Mary beckoned to her spouse to enter. Trembling, Joseph softly and silently tip-toed over to the manger. Tears of joy flooded his eyes as he beheld the tiny infant wrapped in swaddling clothes. Then falling to his knees, he adored the Divine Babe. Words would not come; they could not come. All the hopes of generations, past and yet to come, were wrapped in that silent prayer of Joseph at the manger. And that small, gurgling Infant, beholding the simple humility of His foster-father, without doubt showered oceans of graces upon him; for he saw there, one of the finest acts of Faith that would ever be offered to Him.

Reluctant though he was to tear his eyes away from the Infant Babe, Joseph could not forget that he was husband and guardian. Mary and her Son needed provisions, and it was his duty to procure them. Hurrying into the town, he obtained the necessary food. He did not linger; he was ever longing to again feast his eyes on his God. Shortly afterwards, the shepherds came to the door of the stable, seeking Him of Whom they had been told by the Angels. They still heard in their hearts the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. Now they beheld the

Reason for it. No doubt, they noticed the elderly man kneeling in silent adoration. They did not know who he was, and Joseph was most willing to remain unknown. He was supremely happy in his role, humble though it was, and was not seeking human recognition. His toil-worn face was filled with heavenly light as he steadfastly gazed upon the countenance of Jesus—his Lord, but also his foster-Son.

During the following days, Joseph must have gone through the town, seeking a more fitting dwelling for his family. He was not poverty-stricken; he was a laboring man who must have been able to support a wife for otherwise he would never have consented to marry. Thus, he was able to see if he could hire rooms. By this time some of the crowd that had surged to Bethlehem had begun to leave. There were now many empty rooms. We do not know whether Joseph rented some of these, or whether he accepted accommodations from some of his relatives. We can be sure that he removed Jesus and His Mother from the abandoned stable as quickly as possible. That had been terrible enough during urgent necessity, but it was not fitting that they should have to remain there.

Then followed days of joy-filled waiting. The Holy Family intended to obey all laws; the civil law of registration and the religious laws of Circumcision, Presentation and Purification. Joseph did not see fit to exempt himself or his Family from the fulfillment of the laws, even though he knew that Jesus was the Eternal Law. Finally, the required days were passed, and they could make plans to return to Nazareth—home—where Jesus was to live in subjection to Mary and Joseph until the beginning of His public life.

And the loving, lovable foster-father? He had served well in his important role. Naught was left for him but to increase in sanctity until the day when, in the affectionate arms of Jesus and Mary, he should enter upon his eternal reward to hear: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."²

² Mt. 25, 21.

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