

This fourth Sunday in Advent, is also International Migrants Day. I hope our Advent journey has blest you with a deeper understanding and richer appreciation of the Christmas narrative, through the **REAL** lives of Nathan and Omar.

As we close our journey through Advent, I want us to discover, at the heart of the Christmas narrative are **two** love stories. The first is the obvious love story, *God loved you and I, and all the people in this world so very much, He sent His Son, that whoever believes in Him (believes the message He brings to us from the Father), will enjoy eternal life with the Father.*

There is another deeply endearing love story at the heart of the Christmas narrative, which slips us by every year, unless we make an effort to locate it, dwell on it, and marvel at God who narrates this love story, to mirror, to reflect, to imitate, His own love story!

The only subject that has been written on, sung about, and declared the most in prose and poetry, is the love between a man and a woman. *Why?*, is not the question. How a man and a woman fall in love, is a mystery, and must remain a mystery, because **love** is God's gift, and we must not try to understand God, nor explain His actions.

This second love story begins in the village of Nazareth. A man named Jacob¹ arranges the traditional Hebrew ceremony of *Bar Mitzvah* when his son Joseph turns 13. It is a happy occasion for Jacob to present his son to the community. Together, they pledge responsibility to help Joseph become an adult, to help the young lad into a trade or a vocation best suited to him, and help him excel in it by encouraging him.

By the age of 18 or so, Joseph like young men of his age, would have learned a skill and was ready to make a living. Crafting with his hands

¹ Matthew 1:16

came naturally for young Joseph, and the community encouraged him by using his skills.

Joseph's father might have carved out a small plot of land (if they had land), or a given him shed in the corner of the garden, or vacated a room in the house, where he set up shop and started his trade.

As his reputation grew and he started to earn a living, the young man, like all young men, thought of marrying, settling down and raising a family.

Has anyone seen the film, "*Fiddler on the Roof?*" It is a wonderful narrative on Jewish social life. Tevya, the principal character, has three daughters, the marriage of first was very traditional, the second, not so traditional, and the third, quite radical.

Joseph's name might have been suggested to Mary's family by a match-maker; When both parents are agreed, and the consent of young couple obtained, the match would have been announced and the entire village of Nazareth would have celebrated. **This was the marriage ceremony.** A commitment had been made in public, and the obligation was to be honoured.

After this public event, under his father watchful eye, Joseph would have then started to build a house which would be home for him and Mary. Joseph's father had the final word, when the house would be suitable for the bride to take up residence.

It was during this period, between their marriage, and Mary moving into their home, that the Christmas story unfolds.

It seems the angel Gabriel first visited Mary to give her the news, God had chosen her to be the mother of Israel's long-awaited Saviour. You would expect Mary to be troubled with the news; *How can this be?* Luke tells us, after hearing the angel say, *For nothing will be impossible for God,* and Mary's humble acceptance, *Behold I am the servant of the Lord; may it happen as you have said,* that Mary left **with haste** to visit Elisabeth.

If there was one thing both Mary and Elisabeth shared, it was the fear of exclusion from society. *Please, O please, let my family and friends believe my story. What would I do if they didn't?!*

Both Nathan and Omar struggled with exclusion. Their lives changed very drastically and very suddenly, when their lives took a different turn.

The question facing them, the question facing Mary, and the question facing ourselves in times such as these is, *What will be our response? How do we respond to changes in our lives?*

One of our tendencies is to distance ourselves saying, *Their troubles are not like my troubles. My difficulties are different. No one understands me!*

We declare, *I am on my own; I want to be on my own. There is nothing for me to learn from anyone else.*

Mary left Nazareth in haste to visit Elisabeth, to learn how to respond to what she had been told, from someone going through a similar situation.

The pregnancies of both young and old would have raised eyebrows: a young married girl, waiting to move into her home with her husband, is found pregnant, and an older woman whose husband would have been considered too old to father a child, was also found pregnant! Mary's news would have gone viral, and the gossip mill would have worked overtime to churn out all sorts of unkind stories!

Whom God loves, He chooses, and whom He chooses, He will never leave unprotected or uncared.

Mary left in haste, most probably without informing Joseph. *How can I tell the man I am married to, I am not carrying his son? I am, instead, to be the mother of God's Son, our long awaited Saviour. Will he believe me?*

Matthew tells us, *when Joseph was informed of Mary's pregnancy, being a just and honourable man, not wanting to create a scandal, he considered the*

most appropriate **human** solution: a quick, quiet divorce. This might have protected his reputation, but not Mary's.

As we just said, whom God loves, He chooses, and whom He chooses, He will never leave unprotected or uncared. So God dispatches an angel to inform Joseph, that the child was not the result of her unfaithfulness, rather *Emmanuel - God with us*, the long awaited Saviour.

God chose Mary and Joseph because He knew, despite their doubts and concerns, they would be obedient to His plans. So Joseph does all he can to complete their house as soon as possible, and convinces his father it is good enough for Mary, and *he took Mary as his wife*, he brought her into their home and they settled down as man and wife.

Last Sunday we saw how God arranged the timing of the census, inconvenient as it was for Mary and Joseph, to take them away from Nazareth, and silence the gossip mill, fuelled by those who would relish the opportunity to count back nine months, and ...

Joseph's obedience was all God needed to love and protect them, not only from gossip-mongers, but later also from Herod's massacre of infants.

We do not ascribe much to Joseph, but we make much of Mary as an object of faith. Both Mary and Joseph, however, are very real **examples** of faith, from whom we learn lessons in obedience, even when facts and circumstances point the other way.

Their obedience to God draws them into His open arms. On the night of Jesus' birth, God affirms His plans through a band of excited shepherds, and later provides for their travelling and living needs through the gifts of the wise men.

The Christmas narrative is this love-story, of a man acting in obedience to God, even when society might have told him otherwise, and woman also acting in obedience to God, responding appropriately to Joseph's invitation, trusting him to start life together, as soon as possible.

Did Mary and Joseph live happily ever after? I doubt it. Nagging doubts might have bubbled up in the corners of his mind, and she might have often wondered, *Does he really trust me?*

God's love for us, however, is not conditional on our love for Him. The Apostle John tells us, *We love, because He first loved us.*²

It is because of God's love for us, we learn to love Him and love one another.

Love is an act of will, as much as it is an emotion. Joseph and Mary made a decision to **will** to love each other, despite any misgivings one might have had about the other.

We started out saying that Christmas is the tale of two love stories, woven, braided together. God's love story is reflected in Mary and Joseph's love story.

God **wills** to love us, despite ourselves, and His love is such, when we learn to accept His love, when we learn to accept to be loved by Him, we learn to love each other, which means not holding anything against the other.

This is the message of Christmas, which is beautifully captured by the Apostle John. This is what he says, *Beloved friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves, has God as his Father and knows God. Those who do not love, do not know God; because God is love.*

This now is the Christmas message John gives us, *Here is how God showed His love among us: God sent His only Son into the world, so that through him we might have life. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as a sacrifice to take our sins upon Him.*

To make it absolutely clear, John concludes with this encouragement.

² 1 John 4:19

*As we learn to live in God, our love grows towards perfection. So we will not be consumed with fear on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus showed and taught us, here in this world. The love He showed us has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced God's perfect love. **We love each other because He first loved us.***

A tale of two love stories is the narrative of Christmas. If Mary and Joseph learned to love each other, care for each other, look after each other, despite any misgivings they might have had, surely their example of love of God and faith in God, is one we can learn to make our own.

Both Nathan and Omar experienced God's love through the community of the Church, without which they might not have made it through the horrific and threatening struggles they experienced.

Mary and Joseph experienced God's love and protection because of their obedience to God's Word. As we joyfully sing and reflect quietly on the events of Christmas, remember, ordinary people, like you and me, can live extraordinary lives, because God **first** loved us.

AMEN.