

The Role of Joseph and Our Prudence

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

December 18, 2022

Readings

Matthew 1:18-25 (NKJV)

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. ²⁰ But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

²² So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ²³ "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us."

²⁴ Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, ²⁵ and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus.

Genesis 45:4-8 (NKJV)

⁴ And Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come near to me." So they came near. Then he said: "I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For these two years the famine has been in the land, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. ⁷ And God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. ⁸ So now it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt.

Divine Providence §191

One's own prudence is not real and only appears to be, and also ought to so appear; but Divine Providence, owing to its presence in the smallest details, is universal.

Divine Providence §210

[I]f a person did not manage all the concerns of their function and life as though by their own prudence, they could not be led and directed by Divine providence. For they would be like someone standing with hands hanging limp, mouth open, and eyes closed, holding their breath and awaiting influx.

If you wish to be led by Divine providence, therefore, use prudence as a servant or assistant who faithfully manages the goods of their lord.

Introduction

- Today, we're going to look at Joseph's role in the Christmas story and see what we can learn about the interplay between *our* role and *the Lord's* role in our spiritual development.
- Often, in a New Church sermon, we take a story from the literal sense of the Lord's Word and talk about the deeper spiritual meaning of different parts of the story.
 - And so a sermon about Joseph would typically include an explanation of the spiritual significance of Joseph.
- But, while there are passages in the teachings of the New Church that talk about the spiritual significance of Joseph from the book of Genesis (Joseph with the coat of many colors who eventually became ruler of Egypt), there are no passages that explain the spiritual significance of Joseph in the Christmas story.
 - There have been some great explanations of the *possible* spiritual significance of Joseph written over the years by New Church people, but we're not going to get into those things today.
- Instead, we are going to do something similar but slightly different of first looking at some passages from the teachings of the New Church and then seeing how those teachings can be seen playing out in the literal sense stories about Joseph and, in so doing, find some confirmation and grounding for those ideas in scripture (*Doctrine of Sacred Scripture* §§53-54).

Teachings

Our Prudence

- There are a number of different ways that the teachings of the New Church talk about our role in our spiritual lives.
- One way that's used a lot in the book *Divine Providence* is to talk about our prudence.
 - If the Lord's Divine Providence is how the Lord provides for us then our prudence is how we look after ourselves.
 - In the story of Joseph from Genesis we see Joseph doing a lot of using his prudence to provide for other people.
 - Let me re-read one of the passages from our readings about the role of our prudence:
 - *Divine Providence* §191
 - One's own prudence is not real and only appears to be, and also ought to so appear; but Divine Providence, owing to its presence in the smallest details, is universal.
 - That passage makes me laugh.
 - All of our over-thinking and stressing and trying to figure things out and plan ahead and anticipate... it's not real.
 - It only *appears* to be real.
 - But, then again, it's really important that it *appear* to be real.

Acting As Though from Self

- This appearance that we can do things on our own is sometimes called acting “as if of self” – or acting as though we were acting on our own.
 - *Apocalypse Revealed* §541
 - [T]he only thing that makes a person human, and the only means by which a person is conjoined with the Lord, is their ability to do good and believe truths as though from themselves, namely, as though from their own will in accordance with their own judgment. If this one ability were to be taken away, every means of a person’s conjunction with the Lord and of the Lord with the person would be taken away at the same time. For it is this ability to reciprocate love that the Lord confers on everyone who is born human, which He also preserves in the person even to the end of their life, and afterward to eternity.
 - Without it seeming like our prudence is real, we would have no way of connecting with the Lord.
 - That’s pretty important.
- Now let’s see if we can find some illustration and confirmation of these teachings in the stories about Joseph.

Joseph is Not the Father But Must Act as the Father

- One of the things that is very clear from the Matthew account of the Christmas story is that Joseph is *not* the father of Jesus.
 - As we read in our first lesson, “After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, *before they came together*, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18).
- And yet the genealogy that starts the book of Matthew is, curiously, traced down to Joseph instead of to Mary.
 - It says, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham: Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers; and Judah begot...”
 - And it goes through a whole bunch of names and ends up with “...begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ” (Matthew 1:1-3, 16).
- If he’s not the father, why do we care about his ancestry?
- One way of looking at the significance of this is to think of it representing all that has been passed down from generation to generation through the history of the human race.
 - There’s good and bad in there.
 - There are people who followed the Lord and who did brave and wise things.
 - And there are people who did not follow the Lord who did terrible things.
- In us this might represent all that we can bring to bear on a situation – everything we’ve gained from our heredity and upbringing, everything we’ve learned, all our experience – everything that goes into our prudence or our ability to act as though of ourselves.
 - And the point is that none of that is the father of Jesus.
 - And yet it also still needs to be in the picture.

Joseph Can Only Go So Far

- Joseph's background and upbringing and his own choices seem to have gotten him pretty far.
- A pretty remarkable young woman had agreed to marry him and the Gospel of Matthew says that he was "a just man" who, when he thought that his fiancé had cheated on him, did not want to get revenge on her for betraying him.
- In this way Joseph seems similar to other good people who were alive when the Lord was born.
 - Like Zacharias and Elizabeth who were "both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Luke 1:6) and Simeon who was "was just and devout" (Luke 2:25).
 - Or like the young man that Jesus spoke to thirty years later who had kept all of the commandment from his youth.
 - But all of these seemingly good people still lacked one thing (Mark 10:21).
 - They all needed the Lord Himself if they were actually going to be saved and were actually going to be *genuinely* good.

Things Don't Go According to Plan

- It's the same for any of us that might hope to be a good person.
 - We want to be a good person and we want to go to heaven one day.
 - And so we try to learn how to be a good person and live according to those principles.
 - Something along these lines is probably what is represented by Joseph and Mary being betrothed.
 - In the Word, couples represent some pairing of goodness and truth or of love and wisdom.
 - The state of betrothal or engagement represents that goodness and truth before it was joined together.
 - The plan, the promise, the intention is for them to come together but it hasn't happened yet.
 - They haven't gotten married yet and they haven't had any children yet.
- And then things don't go according to the plan.
 - Mary gets pregnant *before* they have come together.
- We might think of this as being like times when we have some glimpse of goodness in our lives that we know we did not make happen.
 - Maybe it's a love for people of a particular age – teenagers, or old people, or little kids of a certain age.
 - We didn't choose that, we just found it there in ourselves.
 - Or maybe it's a feeling of freedom from a kind of selfishness that used to have us tied up in knots.
 - We may have worked on that issue but we know from experience that we could never free ourselves from it.
 - Or maybe it's a sense of calling to serve a particular use.
 - Or maybe it's an ability to forgive and love a family member that we've had a rocky relationship with.

- If we are paying attention, we will realize that we didn't make things like that happen.
- What do we do then?
 - It seems to Joseph that he has two options:
 - Make Mary a public example and destroy her.
 - Or put her away secretly.
 - Or to put it differently,
 - Control everything.
 - Or let go of all responsibility and connection.
 - We know already that neither of these options is what Joseph should do but let's still explore them a little bit.

Control Everything

- Maybe it doesn't make sense that *Joseph* would want to control everything and destroy Mary but there is someone else in the story who would do that.
 - This whole story happens "...in the days of Herod the king..."
- A cruel desire to control is ruling over the land and we can see this in everything Herod does.
 - He is deeply troubled by anything that might threaten his reign.
 - He is enraged by the wise men not returning to him.
 - And he ultimately decides to murder of all the male babies two and younger in Bethlehem and the surrounding area to try to destroy any challenger to his throne.
- Unfortunately, these Herod-like inclinations are present in all of us.
 - *True Christianity* §612
 - From birth, we long to control other people and to own what belongs to them. These two longings tear to pieces any love we might have for our neighbor. They induce us to hate anyone who opposes us; that hatred leads us to desire revenge; and that desire for revenge inwardly cherishes the idea of our opponent's death.
- This maybe sounds extreme and insane but all of us can struggle with the desire to control others and use them and make them do what we want them to do.
- When we are feeling like life is uncertain and out of control, the temptation is very strong to think we can solve it by just controlling everything and everyone and destroying those that oppose us.

Let Go of All Responsibility and Connection

- The other not-great option is to respond to life not going to plan by letting go of all responsibility and connection.
 - Like one of the passages in our readings described it, "like someone standing with hands hanging limp, mouth open, and eyes closed, holding their breath and awaiting influx."
- Let go, abdicate responsibility, expect God to sort it all out.

Use Prudence as a Servant

- That can sound spiritual and trusting but it's not what the Lord wants us to do.
- He wants us engaged in trying to figure out what to do; that's how we open ourselves up to His leading.
 - "If you wish to be led by Divine providence, therefore, use prudence as a servant or assistant who faithfully manages the goods of their lord."
- We can see this in Joseph who is actively trying to figure out what to do and it is, "while he thought about these things" that an angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and tells him what he should do.
 - "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."
- And then, to Joseph's credit, acting as though from his own will in accordance with his own judgment, he does what the angel told him to do.
 - "Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus."
 - It's interesting, the angel didn't actually say to him that he should not know his wife until after Jesus was born.
 - We can see that as Joseph doing his best to figure out how to implement what the Lord had told him to do.

Joseph's Dreams

- Joseph always gets his messages from the Lord in dreams.
 - This is a fun connection to Joseph from the Old Testament who both had dreams and interpreted other people's dreams.
 - Joseph never sees the angel directly or has a conversation with him, like Zacharias, Mary, or the shepherds.
 - And yet he gets enough to be able to take action.
- The teachings of the New Church say that dreams mean a state of obscurity (*Secrets of Heaven* §2514).
 - When we're trying to do what the Lord wants us to do, we can sometimes be rather unclear as to exactly what He wants us to do.
 - But, as we strive to follow through on what we can see, the Lord gives us greater clarity, just like Joseph was aroused from sleep and took action.
 - And, when the time came, he named the baby what the baby should be named.
 - He didn't call it by his own name, Joseph, claiming it as something that came from him.
 - He named the miraculous baby Jesus, which means "Jehovah saves", in acknowledgment of the reality that it is only the Lord who can save us.

Using Our Prudence to Get to Safety

- In the Gospel of Matthew we next see Joseph right after the wise men have left.
- Matthew 2:13-15 (NKJV)
 - ¹³ Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."
 - ¹⁴ When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt,
 - ¹⁵ and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."
- So Joseph has another dream and again takes action to follow through on what the angel of the Lord has told him to do.
 - It would have taken some figuring to know how to get safely and quietly from Bethlehem to Egypt.
 - Joseph would have had to use his own judgment, which we can perhaps see in the fact that he took them by night.
 - The angel hadn't told him to do that but it makes a lot of sense, given the circumstances.
- And we can see more of the back and forth between guidance from the Lord and Joseph using his own judgment and initiative in how he navigates the decision of when to come back to Israel and where to come back to.
- Matthew 2:19-22 (NKJV)
 - ¹⁹ Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰ saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead." ²¹ Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.
 - ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee.
- The angel is telling Joseph what to do but Joseph is not abdicating his responsibility to think things through carefully.
 - Joseph obeys the command to go back to Israel but then he questions whether Judea is going to be a safe place for them, with Herod's son ruling.
 - And this time, it's only after he has identified the potential problem, that the angel warns him in a dream to go to Galilee instead of Judea.
- All of these interactions just serve to confirm that, trying to be led by the Lord in His providence does not mean that we can stop thinking things through and working hard to figure out what we should do.

Conclusion

- In this Christmas season, let's remember Joseph and the Lord's teachings about the importance of our prudence.
 - In the stress and overwhelm and the ups and downs of this time of year, let's try reject the urge to control everything and let's also try to reject the inclination to abdicate all responsibility.
 - Instead, let's keep on trying to think things through and figure out the right thing to do, and trying to be open to the Lord's gentle leading.
 - If we do we may just get to be witness to the Lord coming into our world in a new and miraculous way.
 - "Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus."
- Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.