

Loosing and finding Jesus – 18 June 2021 (Year of St Joseph) – 1

Greetings. I am delighted to be part of this international parish cell response to Pope Francis' call for a Year of St Joseph.

“Loosing and finding Jesus” is the theme of my presentation.

An interesting fact about Joseph is that he never speaks in the scriptures. So we are left with what was said about him.

In Luke 3: 41-50, Joseph with Mary and Jesus, their 12 year old son, are making their annual visit to the temple in Jerusalem. This was part of living out their Jewish faith. However, at the end of their first day's journey home, they discovered that Jesus was with neither parent. He was lost.

Imagine their shock and anxiety as parents. With haste, they head back to Jerusalem, while scanning the horizon for any trace of him.

Finally, they enter the temple. He is sitting with the teachers and scholars and answering questions. He seems very happy. He even seems at home here. He was not lost. He was very aware of where he was and what he was doing. Rather Joseph and Mary had lost their connection with him.

They are delighted to find him. They greet him. Mary's words carry some hint of distress. He replies, “Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs”.

Joseph (and Mary) feel a real stinging sense of loss. They are deeply challenged. Their son is quickly growing up. He follows another agenda. It speaks of distance from his parents, of losing him. They recall the words of Simeon. And now a sword pierces their souls.

And yet as a Jewish father, Joseph equally feels real pride. After all, is not faithfulness to the Father the hope of every Jew for their child? For Joseph, a sense of equality and of brotherhood with his son forms, as he observes his son's convictions and acceptance of Judaism.

Joseph had already known other similar events. Indeed, this dynamic of losing and finding seemed a recurring feature during his life.

He was, for example, betrothed to Mary. God was blessing their relationship. Joseph knew what was expected of him. All seemed predictable. And then, Mary's pregnancy shocked him. It was too much for him. All seemed lost. He quickly made up his mind to divorce her and move on. His trust in God was shaken. He was, in our terms, thrown into a spiritual crisis.

However, a deeper question, beyond his pain, gradually surfaced. What does God want of me? Then an angel appears to him in a dream and says, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home.” He knew then that God was at work here. He trusted in God's Spirit, and accepted a new vision for his

life beyond loss. When all seemed lost, God's greater love, and plan for him, began to open up.

Joseph had other dreams (Matt 1:20; 2:13,19,22). Pope Francis understands them as the dynamic of losing and finding at work. He says: 'These (dreams) were calls from God, but they were not easy to accept. After each dream, Joseph had to change his plans and take a risk, sacrificing his own plans in order to follow the mysterious designs of God, whom he trusted completely'.¹

CENTRAL DYNAMIC OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

The experience of losing and finding it not confined to St. Joseph. It is a central dynamic of Christian living. It is, for example, difficult to read the scriptures without recognising the pattern of loss and defeat yielding to finding new life.

In Luke 9: 23-24, for example, this dynamic is explicitly stated. Jesus speaks about being a disciple, and says (I quote): 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it, but anyone who loses his life for my sake that person will save it' His words here are repeated almost verbatim in Mark 8:34-35 and in Matthew 16:24-26. This highlights the central place of losing and finding in the mind of Christ and in the early Christian consciousness.²

Jesus prophesied that this was also his path in life. He said: 'The Son of Man is destined to suffer grievously; to be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and to be put to death, and to be raised up on the last day' (Luke 9:22).

To follow Christ then calls for a radical decision. We see this in the very first words of Jesus in Mark's gospel, 'repent, and believe the Good News' (Mark 1: 15).

Repent, metanoia. See where you are missing the mark. Change. Reverse your way of living. Let this happen at the very depths of your being and not just at the surface. "Be born again" is how Jesus expressed it to Nicodemus. In other words be open to the newness of God's Spirit for your life. Be baptised in His Holy Spirit. God is leading you. Die to your small individualistic way of seeing things, and let a fundamentally new perspective and way of living emerge.

St Paul advises: Put on Christ (Galatians 3:27). Take on the new mind, 'which was in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 2:5)

For Paul, this involves a major transformation. He describes it: 'I live now not I but Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20)

He says; 'I have accepted the loss of everything' (Philippians 3:8) because I want 'to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, sharing his suffering and reproducing the pattern of his life and death'(v10).

And believe the Good News. You are a witness of God's presence in the world. Peter's epistle describes who we are: 'We are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light' (1 Peter 2:9).

¹ Message of Pope Francis on the theme; Saint Joseph: The dream of Vocations.

² Luke emphasises that these words are spoken to all the people (Lk 9: 23)

SOME CONCLUSIONS:

Can you dare trust the Good News of Christ at work in you? Can you lose your life to gain it? If yes, you will see the power of Christ's resurrection. You will witness to his power. You will share building God's kingdom as the coming together of all things to the glory of the Father.

One day a grandfather was telling his grandchild about two wolves. They lived in each person, he said. One was kind, compassionate, thankful, charitable. The other was grumpy, angry, a thief who would not share with others. The little child was fascinated. And then she asks: And who wins. The grandparent replied: The one you feed.

Likewise, as cell people, our evangelizing mission will 'win' if our spirits are nourished.

In this we can learn from St Joseph. As an active Jew, he went, with Mary and Jesus, on the annual Passover pilgrimage, celebrated the weekly Sabbath, and daily rituals.

We equally need our prayer structures.

- ✓ We need time each day to be with the Father in secret, to commune with the mystery of God, and yearn for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.
- ✓ We need the scriptures, as the Word of God, and hold it silently in our hands and hearts in trust that He will speak as we need.
- ✓ We need to be immersed in the prayer and life of the Church, especially the Eucharist, adoration, sacrament of Reconciliation, study, and spiritual reading.
- ✓ And in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

Our own experiences tell us that without planned structures, it is all too easy to forget the resurrected life and power of God in which we share. We can easily think it is up to us, and become self-reliant while forgetting the love of God who impels us onwards.

IN RELATION TO CELL

Every cell person, from time to time, feels a sense of loss. It can take many forms. We may grow lukewarm about witness. We can feel disappointed when someone no longer comes to cell meetings. We may think we have lost our ability to pray. We may feel that God challenges us beyond our abilities. We may be tempted to give up.

These are important moments. They can equally lead us to new beginnings and to a deeper understanding of ourselves. They are not saying that all is lost. Rather, they ask some fundamental questions. What is now happening in your life? To what new thing is God calling you? What is he teaching you? Can you trust his bigger grace and vision for your life?

Joseph placed his trust in God's loving plan. For us too, it is all the more urgent to draw close to God when we feel weak. At such times, we can learn more clearly about him who is our strength and who desires that we bear fruit in his name (John 15).

During these times, we need contact with people of faith. We need an individual, a spiritual director or a group with whom we regularly share and reflect. Our cell friends are very important. They know us. They will pray for us. Their stories will inspire and encourage us because each tell of the work of God who leads them to new life and light beyond death and darkness.

When parish cells were beginning in Ireland, we asked Msgr. Michael Eivers, a pioneer in Catholic cell evangelization what should we pray for. His reply was simply 'perseverance'.

Pope Francis in *Joy of the Gospel* says: 'However dark things are, goodness always re-emerges and spreads.. Human beings have arisen time after time from situations that seemed doomed. Such is the power of the resurrection and all who evangelize are instruments of that power' (EG, 276).

As conclusion: I invite you to think of a situation that challenges you. What might St Joseph do in your situation? What might he say to you? Can you trust God and let yourself be led by him through this situation?