

4th Sunday in Advent, Cycle A
Isaiah 7: 10-14
Psalm 24: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6
Romans 1: 1-7
Matthew 1: 18-24
Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.
The Garaventa Center
The University of Portland

In the family tree that immediately precedes today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, David and Bathsheba are listed among the ancestors of Jesus Christ. The story of King David's seduction of Bathsheba is among the most famous in the Old Testament. David sees Bathsheba bathing and asks who she is. He's told that she's the wife of one of his officers. He seduces her anyway. She becomes pregnant, and David goes to great lengths to try to cover up what he has done. Many modern readers of the story have noticed that we never learn what Bathsheba thinks or feels about the situation. Instead, the whole story is told from David's perspective.

Our Gospel account of how the birth of Jesus came about shows a kind of "family resemblance" with the tale of his remote ancestors, David and Bathsheba. Here again, a young woman is pregnant in irregular circumstances. Here again, we wonder how she feels. What does Mary think about the extraordinary situation? We are not told. Instead the whole story is told from Joseph's perspective. He is the one who receives a message from an angel. Joseph must decide what to do. Thankfully, "Joseph, Son of David" outshines his royal ancestor. In the moment of crisis he rises to the occasion.

If the narration of the story is careless of Mary's feelings, Joseph is not. He's "unwilling to expose her to shame." The Law would have him "divorce" her publicly, letting the world know why. And Joseph lives by the Law. That's what it means to call him "a righteous man." A righteous man regards the Law of Moses as God's most precious gift to humanity. Following the Law provides absolute assurance that at every moment you are doing precisely what God wants you to do. But then what is Joseph to do with the compassion he feels for Mary in her situation? Here in the first chapter of Matthew, Joseph is already grappling with one of the most fundamental questions in the Gospels. He is trying to negotiate the tension between love and the Law. Essentially, of course, the purpose of the Law is to show us how to love God, and each other, properly. But what about those awkward occasions like the one Joseph is facing now, when the Law seems to constitute an obstacle to our efforts to love?

Joseph's first inclination is to resolve the difficulty by acting with moderation and prudence - splitting the difference between righteousness and compassion. He plans to spare Mary's feelings as much as possible, by divorcing her quietly. At this point the angel steps into the picture and reveals to Joseph that with the coming of Mary's child, Love has broken into the world in an astonishing new way. Now the *right* thing to do is the previously *unimaginable* thing. Joseph must choose to love prodigally, selflessly, without counting the cost. He does. He takes Mary as his wife, and raises her child as his own. Joseph's actions presage the selfless love that child will one day loose in the world for our salvation. And so another "family resemblance" is revealed. It is the coming of that same Love into our world that we await with such yearning during these last few days before Christmas. Meanwhile, we do our best to live like

Joseph did - attentive to those whose suffering might otherwise be left out of the stories of our lives and times, loving them like Christ.