

HOMILY – FEAST OF ST JOSEPH, 18 MARCH 2021



The Dream of St Joseph
Philippe de Champaigne
National Gallery, London

1602-1674 – born in Brussels, worked in Paris for Cardinal Richelieu of Three Musketeers fame – lots of portraits (including one of Charles II), lots of religious paintings.

Joseph is so often portrayed as asleep – it’s not that he’s lazy or a useless man, it is because the bible tells of his dreams. The dream we read about in our Gospel, when God tells him to marry Mary, the dream which tells the Holy Family to escape to Egypt, then “after Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt” (Matthew 2.19) and tells them to go back to Nazareth.

I like the idea of being remembered as a dreamer – which is interesting when we also know him as a carpenter, a very practical occupation. I am useless with DIY, indeed my woodwork teacher once called me “the stupidest boy in all Cambridgeshire” when I broke the second hacksaw blade of the lesson, I have never thought I had much in common. But “to sleep, perchance to dream” (Hamlet, act 3 scene 1) – I can do that!



Here is Joseph, there with Mother and Baby

The Virgin adoring the child with St Joseph

Fra Bartolommeo – Bartolommeo di Paolo del Fattorina – 1472-1517

Apprenticed to an artist as a teenager, he became a Dominican Friar in 1500, and actually stopped painting because he was concerned that art could be a barrier to faith. In 1504 he was sent to head up the art workshop of his monastery in Florence, so combining his art and his faith – he worked with Raphael, and spend some time in Venice and Rome – all working for the Order. Real people, with a real story – though I hope real parents would give their child a blanket. Fra Bartolommeo has set this in his local landscape – the Holy Family are among us. You often get derelict, broken buildings in the background – giving the idea that the Old Order has ended, Christ is something now.

I find the title odd - *The Virgin adoring the child ... with St Joseph* – let's not forget his role. He's not an add-on, he's the man who loved Mary, who accepted Mary, who protected Mary. I have no doubt he adored their child just as much as she did. We know that Mary and Joseph had other children – Matthew 13 mentions them. I don't have a problem with Mary being a Virgin when she conceived Jesus (though that's perhaps a subject for next Thursday when we celebrate the Annunciation), but I'm sure that there was a point, when she'd recovered from giving birth, and Jesus was happily asleep in his

cot, that Joseph and Mary did what loving couples do. I thank God for their love.



Finally, a gorgeous picture

La Madonna del Gatto
The Madonna of the Cat
Frederico Barocci

Frederico Barocci lived Urbino near Venice – 1535 to 1612 – one of the greatest Italian painters of his time, there is a 6 minute video about him on the National Gallery website.

Here we have Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist and Jesus. Painted with gorgeous colours – watching the cat, who’s watching them.

No deep theology required, this is a loving family, with a lovable cat. We thank God for Joseph, and the love he gave the lad who, to all intents and purposes, was his Son.