4 Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Advent Year A

18 December 2016

Is 7:10-14; Rom 1:1-7; Mt 1:18-24

St Therese of Lisieux was also known as “Play Mate” of the Child Jesus because in her childlike fervour, she loved to imagine herself as a little ball that the “Child Jesus” could play with. She would correlate different circumstances of her life to what Jesus was doing with his “little toy ball” at the time – either bouncing it around in play, or holding it tight to His heart, or just leaving it alone in the corner. She would imagine that, during some events of her life and the arid times of prayer, Jesus had left her (the ball) in the corner and he was sleeping and not paying attention to her.

This would have been the exact experience of Mother Mary and Joseph. Incarnation, apart from God’s powerful hand, was possible only due to the greatest “fiat”, the greatest yes that both Mary and Joseph said. They took audacious brave faith risks, blindly throwing themselves into the hands of God. In the Nativity narrative that we listened to today, the birth of Jesus is surrounded by audacious brave faith risks by these two, namely, Mary’s openness to the Holy Spirit (like St Therese of Lisieux) and Joseph’s gentle uprightness. Therefore, I thought that is it is worth examining the historical predicament that these two figures were in and placing some questions for you to reflect on.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, marriages were arranged by parents to join extended families and not individuals. On the other hand, it would be wrong to consider betrothal as similar to our idea of engagement before marriage. Betrothal was the initial phase of the marriage process in which prospective spouses were set apart for each other. Though a betrothed couple did not live together, a formal divorce was required to break the public establishment of the betrothal. So sex with a betrothed woman was considered adultery. This is the predicament of Mary. Mary’s conception and pregnancy brought her personal plans and agendas to an end and put her life at stake.

Let us now see Joseph’s side of the story. The honour code of the Mediterranean world and even the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) demanded that no one take what properly belongs to another. Mary’s child is not Joseph’s, so he hesitates to take it. By law, Joseph is supposed to return Mary to her father and expose her to death. The Book of Numbers describes the ordeal Mary would have to undergo and finally be stoned to death. But Joseph, being an honourable man, was determined to divorce her secretly, because if Mary’s name was tarnished she would never be able to marry with an illegitimate child to support. His sense of honour hopes that the rightful father will seize this opportunity to claim the child and marry Mary. In the light of these two backgrounds of Mary and Joseph, let us examine ourselves as some questions are placed before us:

Q. What values and virtues do Mary and Joseph display in this episode?

Q. Are we ready, or how hard is it for us to give up our personal plans, schemes and agendas, if God has different plans for us, for our families and our communities?

Q. How can we surrender like Mary and Joseph to the will of God, blindly trusting in God’s power?