

In these final days of Advent, we are confronted with a searching question: what does true holiness look like? Our world misunderstands holiness and tries to convince us that either holiness is not attainable, or that it doesn't matter. "Be nice to others, nothing more should be expected of you." But God's Word reveals something much more profound and meaningful. Holiness is born not first of action, but of faith: a heart willing to trust God when his ways are unclear, costly, or unsettling. As the mysteries of Christmas continue to unfold before us, today's readings invite us to plunge more deeply into the mystery, to encounter individuals who stand at the crossroads of history, who remind us that faith—not appearances, not control, not success—is what ultimately makes life meaningful.

The prophet Isaiah confronts King Ahaz with a choice. God invites him to ask for a sign that is deep as the netherworld or high as the sky. On the surface, Ahaz's refusal sounds pious: "I will not tempt the Lord." But beneath that language is fear, not faith. Ahaz has already placed his trust elsewhere—in political alliances, in Assyria, the greatest world power of his day. His only concern is following the Assyrian religious and social customs that will keep him in power. From the outside he looks competent, and perhaps even wise, but he is not holy. He is unfaithful to the covenant God has made with his chosen people, and in turning to idols he profanes the very religion he is meant to safeguard. Ahaz teaches us

something sobering: religious language can sometimes conceal a closed heart.

Now contrast Ahaz with Joseph.

Matthew calls him a righteous man. At first, Joseph responds in a way that is deeply honorable. Faced with Mary's pregnancy, he resolves to divorce her quietly. He protects her from public shame. It is noble. It is compassionate. It is admirable. But the Gospel does not end there; God wants more from Joseph, and he wants to offer more to Joseph.

Matthew tells us that "such was his intention"—*ἐνθυμηθέντος*. Literally, "these things having been pondered." Joseph is still in anguish but he doesn't want to act impulsively just so that his problem will go away. He enters deeply into discernment. "The whole suspense contained in Joseph's mind, his quandary at the apparent contradiction of God's ways, the empty anguish over what to do (remain). He has plunged into the mystery God has held out before him."<sup>[1]</sup> Joseph allows himself to dwell in the tension, continually open to God's prompting. And it is precisely there—in the tension within that openness that comes from faith—that God speaks.

Joseph's first decision was heroic. His second decision—after listening to God—was holy. He takes Mary into his home. He accepts a life he did not plan. He entrusts his future, his reputation, and even his understanding of righteousness to God's design. What makes Joseph holy is not simply that he saved Mary from disgrace, but that he

allowed God to rewrite the roadmap of his life. He would spend the rest of his life protecting Mary and the child she carried in her womb. It was this quiet strength, fidelity, and guardianship that led Pope Pius IX to name St. Joseph the patron—that is, the protector—of the Universal Church, mirroring Joseph’s role as guardian of Jesus and Mary. Subsequent popes have reaffirmed this unique role Joseph continues to play in the life of the Church.

We live in a world that celebrates heroism—achievement, productivity, and outward accomplishment. But the Gospel calls us further. Holiness requires surrender. It asks us to let go of our limited perspective—so bound to time, outcomes, and appearances—and to trust God’s deeper purpose: our salvation.

Joseph teaches us that holiness often looks quiet. It unfolds in discernment, obedience, and the willingness to start over again, allowing God’s wisdom to triumph over our own. And the Child Joseph names—Jesus—reveals why this matters. He does not come merely to rescue us from the consequences of sin, but to save us from sin itself, to free us for a holy life.

As we stand on the threshold of Christmas, the question before us is not whether we can be heroic, but whether we are willing to be holy. Are our hearts open enough for God to enter? Will we let Him surprise us? Will we trust Him more than our plans?

Let the Lord enter; He is the King of glory. And where He enters—not heroism, but holiness—will have the final word.

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[1] Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 66.