

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Advent (A)  
St. Joseph's Neier December 21-22, 2013  
Rev. Kevin Schmittgens

Central Idea: Joseph teaches us, especially us men, to be righteous and kind, even when we don't have it all figured out.

He was a plain looking man.

His name was Marcello Morante. He was born in Rome Italy in 1916 and he died in 2005 at the age of 89. I have never met him. I have never heard his voice. And as far as I know he only did one thing of any significance in his life. (He probably did more, but I am unaware of them.)

Nevertheless, whenever I think of our patron, St. Joseph, whenever I pray about his contribution to the work of salvation, whenever I try to visualize him, I will, probably until I die, think of Marcello Morante.

Morante was a lawyer, a bit pudgy, with a plain, nondescript face, and receding hairline. He was not movie star material. But that was probably the very reason why Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini cast him as Joseph in 1963 for the film, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*; a film which is undoubtedly one of most controversial versions of the story of Jesus Christ, as well as one of the best.

A little film history is necessary here. Pier Paolo Pasolini was probably the last person you would think would direct a film about Jesus. He was a Communist (at a time when that meant something), he was an atheist (at a time when that wasn't quite so trendy) and he was a homosexual (long long before that lifestyle was even remotely acceptable). So why make a film about Jesus? Pasolini saw, as many do, the revolutionary spirit in the life of Jesus. He saw someone who didn't pander to or accept the status quo, someone who moved others to justice and peace, someone who changed the world. He was also an admirer of Pope John XXIII who, like Pope Francis in our day, changed the way people looked at the church and at religion. Pasolini, surprisingly, stayed doggedly verbatim to the words of the gospel. He kept to the script. It is the most faithful rendition of the Scriptures ever on film. He also populated his film with ordinary, everyday people, as far removed from starlets and movie icons as you can possibly get. He hired a Spanish literature student to play Jesus and got his own mother to play the older version of Mary. And he hired plain old Marcello Morante as Joseph.

Joseph's role is minuscule, yet in many ways it sets the tone for the entire film. He never speaks, but his facial expression and his body language are amazing. Because it is Matthew's version of the gospel, Joseph plays an important role at the beginning. There are four key moments that I would like to share with you.

The first is at the very beginning, we see back and forth shots between Joseph and Mary faces. His look is confused with a mixture of pain, shame and hurt. They say nothing. They just look at each other woefully. Then comes the full shot of Mary, obviously pregnant. We see why Joseph is hurt.

The second follows immediately. Joseph wanders down a long road. His footsteps are heavy. He is hurt, betrayed even, and yet there is a poignant reluctance to lash out at Mary and seek retribution. He wants to help her but he can't. He sees little boys playing and thinks of the child to be born. He slumps down, asleep, and awakens to a vision of an angel who explains to him what is happening and his place in this story.

The third is Joseph walking back down that same long road. His footsteps are lighter, he almost trots. He is, in his mind, thinking out the prophecies of the Messiah that the angel relates to him. He comes back to Mary's home. Once again, there is a back and forth between him and Mary. And all Morante does is give a quick little smile and a nod of his head and with that soft and understated look, Mary, for the first time, smiles and nods back. It is, for me at least, one of the great moments of cinema.

Finally, at the end of the sequence, after Mary and Joseph run off to Egypt to escape the violence of King Herod, we see Joseph and the toddler Jesus who is playing. Joseph motions to him to come and the little child walks into the open arms of his foster father. It is a quick, warm and affectionate scene, one we rarely see. We see Mary holding Jesus a lot, very few times do we see Joseph. I believe this is one of the reasons, when I think of St. Joseph, I like keeping this image in my mind.

In those four quick scenes, barely fifteen minutes of film, we see the life, the character and the love of our patron saint.

He is a real man. We tend to think about people who populate the Bible as having it all together, cool and collected, quite different from the people we are. This Joseph DOESN'T have it all together. He is confused, bothered and bewildered. He wants to do what is right and just, but he is also obviously hurt. His life is not headed in the direction he wanted. He does not make his own way. But real men are like that. Real men despite what they may want you to think, rarely have it all together. That is what makes them real. That is what makes them accessible. That is what makes them great.

Secondly, he is an open man. He is willing to listen to the angel, to the movement of his heart, to the prophets and the Scriptures, to his God. This openness allows for Jesus to be born into our world. It allows us to find hope and life. We, likewise, are called to be open.

Finally, Joseph is a man of kindness and righteousness. He not only seeks to do what is right and good, he also seeks to do what is kind. Sometimes those things are in opposition. But a real man like Joseph is able to work through those contradictions, he is able to find his way down the long path.

Pasolini met a violent end in 1975, being murdered by being run over by his own car. The story is disturbing, lurid and not without controversy. Enough said about that.

As I mentioned, Morante died in 2005, and yet his performance will live on, not only on video, but in my heart as I think about the kind of man our patron was, and the kind of man I hope to become.

I got the "plain looking" part down pat.