

JOSEPH

Where are you, father, where?
Caught in the jealous trap
Of an empty house I hear[,]
As I sit alone in the dark[,]
Everything, everything,
The drip of the bathroom tap,
The creak of the sofa spring,
The wind in the air shaft, all
Making the same remark
Stupidly, stupidly,
Over and over again.
Father, what have I done?
Answer me, father, how
Can I answer the tactless wall
Or the pompous furniture now?
Answer them ...

GABRIEL

No, you must.

JOSEPH

How then am I to know
Father, that you are just?
Give me one reason.

GABRIEL

No.

JOSEPH

All I ask is one
Important and elegant proof
That what my love has done
Was really at your *will*
And that *your will* is love.

GABRIEL

No, ***you must believe;***
Be silent, and be still.

** ** *

What would it have meant ... what would the consequence have been ... if, as he'd planned, St Joseph *had* "dismissed [Mary], quietly"? After all, this was now *clearly* more than he'd bargained for. The woman to whom he was engaged had become pregnant—and, Joseph knew, *not* with him. And now there was snickering gossip ... scornful judgment. And some fearsome angel whispering to Joseph ... but only in a dream: a skimpy, threadbare READER'S DIGEST version of the glorious Annunciation that the *Virgin Mary* gets to hear—in full, and while conscious—from her own angel (Lk 1:26-38). How many of us, in Joseph's place, would not have been plagued by his same doubts ... his same superficially indignant, but ultimately feeble, demand for *proof* from God that all this was, indeed, God's will?

For Joseph, in St Matthew's account, stands for each and every one of us. To Mary is given the full divine knowledge of God's plan ... God's course of action ... and, it should be said, this carries with it its *own* anxiety and pain. But Joseph hears only in a dream ... knows only what Mary—perhaps dear, but certainly not yet intimate—has told him. And yet, the angel tells him, "you *must* believe."

"You must believe" not because not-believing will stymie or stall God's plan; God needs no human assent. "You must believe" not because it is God's command; God gives us free will and allows us its full exercise. "You must believe" not because it is the polite or the expected thing to do; God does not care about pretext ... and sees right through all our playacting.

No, "you must believe" ... *Joseph* "must believe" ... *we* "must believe" ... because belief is *God's gift to us*. The posture of Christmas is our kneeling at the Manger in overflowing gratitude ... and still-greater joy ... at God's coming. And the only way we'll make it down onto our knees by Christmas ... is by taking Advent to practice: Yes, to prepare our hearts to coo over the innocent

Babe wrapped in swaddling bands ... but also to prepare our *spirits* to believe that this *is* the Christ—God's Anointed One—and that He *has* come: no matter the titterers and scoffers ... no matter those who pity us as weak or gullible ... no matter our *own* rejected demands (or pleas) for proof.

For **the** belief in Christ ... the faith ... the consenting-to ... that draws us to the Manger, in silence and stillness ... in full confidence of God's love and grace ... is *precisely* the gift God gives us to help us make our way through this world and emerge into the Eternal Light. For in his embarrassment, his doubts and his futile hopes, Joseph *is* every one of us, stumbling our way through the Advent that is life. *And* ... and in his *belief*, Joseph is the vulnerability ... is the letting-go ... is the openness to God that will bring us, once more, to the Manger and let us behold, in joy amazement, the Birth of our Salvation: Mary's Child.



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