

## What is it about Joseph?

### There is often one person in our lives who carries the key to salvation

As we approach the feast of St. Joseph, I am reminded of another Joseph and indeed, although it relates to some decades ago, I cannot switch off from this particular Joseph. Yes, he inched his way into my soul. On reflection, I think he was and is, as we say in Irish an 'anam chara' for me!

He came to the presbytery on a Saturday around four. Joseph was a heavy drinker, a gambler, and had frequent brushes with the law. He barged into every conversation I tried to have with parishioners before and after Mass. He muttered obscenities and refused to be silenced. He rang me at all hours of the day and night. He wanted me to vouch for a purchase somewhere in the city, of a pair of shoes, of a Daniel O'Donnell or Marilla Ness video, of an anorak. My heart sank when he pressed the doorbell continuously some time before evening Mass. I could be folding the newsletters or snatching a brief nap. He staggered through the door in a storm of blame:- 'Celtic should have drawn with Rangers, not beaten them.' (He had bet on a draw.) 'Kieran Fallon should have used the whip in the 2.30.' (His horse came fourth.) 'Fr So and So is turning against me; he told me to get lost last Sunday.' (He had lost a fruitful source of revenue.)

Boundaries had little meaning for Joseph. 'No drinking in the kitchen,' I spoke in a hard voice, and Joseph smiled indulgently. 'No shouting during Mass,' and Joseph nodded his head understandingly. I lost my temper with Joseph – often. In my exasperation I used intemperate language with him, that I have deeply regretted. In some kind of extreme frustration I once chased him through the streets around our church to get rid of him – me, desperate; him, stubborn and defiant. Yet, in spite of all of this, I just cannot understand how Joseph has wrapped himself around my soul through all these years.



I see him at two levels. On the one hand, I do not judge those who had no time for him. Part of me agrees with those who refused to have any truck with him. He spent what he got on drink. His rudeness should not be tolerated in any church. He frightened people and may well have dissuaded some from coming to Mass. He made parishioners feel decidedly uncomfortable. Maybe because he reminded them of something in themselves that they found unacceptable.

On the other hand, there was something about Joseph that made me see him as Jesus Christ. Hasn't Pope Francis given us a great lead in his Lenten Message when he says: 'In the poor and outcast we see Christ's face; by loving and helping the poor, we love and serve Christ.'

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- Pope Francis' Lenten Message



This fact may come across to people as strange or shocking. And it is. But sometimes we misread the raw and uncompromising vision of his mission that Jesus repeated so often. The weekly gathering of the faithful is not meant to be just about a neighbourly, warm meeting of local Catholics. It is more than a parochial, domestic cosiness, worshipping without any sense of sacrifice. It is about a radical turning upside-down of what our respectable society regards as acceptable.

On one occasion during Mass, I noticed unusual activity going on down in the body of the church. Joseph had barged through the pews and created quite a racket at the candelabra during the consecration. A few able-bodied worshippers had eased him out into the street. The Mass continued in peace and quiet – with no disturbance, no irritant, nothing but the usual routine. In one sense, the incident was but a passing moment. And yet, I felt it to be a significant one too. I shared my thoughts with the congregation before the last blessing. It comes as a surprise to the faithful when the counter-

cultural nature of the Eucharist is revealed. Its prophetic dimension, almost by definition, has to be rejected. It is too shocking.

Two thousand years on, how can this still be so? After all, we have spent our lives reading and listening to the words of Matthew 25, to the Beatitudes, to the stories about the Pharisee and the publican, the cup of cold



water. It is one thing to make a fuss over disabled people who are neat and tidy, who call out to our compassion, whose wheelchairs we gladly push while they thank us cheerfully for doing so.

Joseph is different. Yet the truly Christian Sunday Eucharist would place him in the front seat. It would honour him as the special guest. It would cherish him as a perfect example of the outsiders in the scriptures – those despised, marginalised and often hated members of a society intent on destroying them. Such are the people that Jesus lived, loved and died for. Such are the people

that Jesus placed before everyone else. And such are the people whose feet we, today, are called to wash. Warts and all, Joseph is the litmus test of our faith. He is our 'Anam Chara'.

He makes me think of this poem by R. A. K. Mason:

*His body doubled under the pack  
that sprawls untidily on his old back,  
the cold, wet deadbeat plods up the track.  
The cook peers out: 'O curse that old lag  
here again with his clumsy swag  
made of a dirty old turnip bag.'  
'Hey Cook, bring him in from the gray smelly street;  
put silk on his body, slippers on his feet;  
give him fire and bread and meat.  
Let the fruit be plucked and the cake be iced,  
the bed be snug and the wine be spiced  
in the old cove's nightcap – for this is Christ.'*

Our Joseph travelled a long way to visit us. I often tried to fob him off by leaving him in the kitchen with a cup of coffee (three sugars) and a rough sandwich (no cheese). But within minutes he followed me down the corridor, into the sacristy, around the altar. And talked, talked, talked – about the price of a pint in 'The Fox and Hounds', the reduction on chicken curry at Asda, the greyhound, horse or priest who let him down. Joseph was barred from betting-shops, off-licences and video stores all over the city. He spelt it all out without embarrassment or guilt. There was a shocking innocence about Joseph. He may have been feckless and reckless but he was not two-faced or devious.

I sometimes think he only wanted to be listened to, to be respected as a human being, to be understood. Sometimes the veil slipped and I glimpsed that other, tender side of Joseph. Out of the corner of my eye, I twice noticed Joseph pausing for a moment from his restless ranting and pacing around the church. For some reason his attention was caught by the slanting light on a statue or on the intricate Pugin reredos over the altar. His face changed and he looked as though he was trying to remember something elusive, something from another time, another land – maybe his childhood.

And lastly, after an evening Mass, he was once again setting out into the dark to catch his bus 'home'. It was then that Joseph, 'the least of these my people', the butt of the world's jokes and anger, turned to me. 'You know,' he said, a peculiar, impish little smile transforming his ravaged face into its lost youthfulness, 'people miss me when I'm not around. I feel very loved tonight.'

