

Advent Reflection: St Joseph's life lessons



At this time of year, we begin to see a great deal of a certain individual. Generally depicted as an elderly man, he appears on Christmas cards around the world. When we think of him, we recall his long journey carrying precious cargo, helping to deliver for each of us a special gift. And this man is... St Joseph.

It's no surprise that some of us immediately thought of Santa, as Joseph is sometimes overlooked. So, it's good that Pope Francis dedicated the year 2021 to him, as Pope Francis believes there are important life lessons we can learn from this quiet man, into whose care God the Father entrusted his only Son. As the year of St Joseph draws to a close and as we prepare to celebrate the birth of God's Son, Jesus, let's consider some of Joseph's life lessons now.

The first lesson Joseph teaches us is this Advent is, be open to change. Although he is often portrayed as an older man, Joseph was probably only in his twenties when he and Mary became engaged. In Joseph's day this was an age to make firm plans for marriage, children, and a home. Joseph had all this in hand, but his plans were overturned when Mary told him she was pregnant.

Some of us will know what it is like to have important plans overturned. Our first reaction is often disappointment or anger. Then there's a risk we become closed off and bitter as we think about what could have been. But Joseph shows us what can happen when we keep an open heart and open mind.

Joseph's faith had taught him to listen to God and trust God's ways, even when we can't understand why things are as they are. After God spoke to Joseph in a dream, confirming that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, scripture tells us that Joseph didn't question or grumble. Rather he accepted how things were and embraced the responsibilities these changes brought.

In the weeks ahead, if your plans change, try not to be disappointed and bitter. Do your best to be open hearted and open minded. Don't close yourself off to what seems different. Look for possibilities that come with change and trust that God can turn all things to good.

The second lesson Joseph teaches us this Advent is how to wait well. Waiting isn't easy, especially if we are waiting for a special event. It's no coincidence that the word *patience* comes from an ancient word meaning *to suffer*. Joseph belonged to a family that had been waiting hundreds of years for a very special event. Prophets had foretold that God's saviour would descend from Joseph's family tree, a tree with ancient roots all the way back to Abraham, but no saviour baby had arrived yet.

Have you ever waited so long for something that you lost hope and gave up? It's easily done. But Joseph didn't give up, instead he used his time waiting to prepare. The Gospels tell us that Joseph made time to listen to God through prayer and scripture. Waiting in this way helped Joseph to grow in understanding, patience, and faith.

Is there something you are waiting for that you can use time well preparing for? Can you help others as they wait too? Encouraging and praying for them so they don't give up hope.

The third lesson Joseph teaches us this Advent is, it's okay at times to stand back and be silent. We are entering a season full of noise and activity. At that first Christmas, Joseph experienced some of this too. Imagine trying to find somewhere safe for Mary to give birth in the middle of a busy town, then imagine helping with childbirth, then dealing with the arrival of unknown shepherds and strange visitors.

But amidst all this activity, Joseph is recorded as saying nothing at all. In fact, there are no words of his recorded anywhere in the Gospels. Today this seems very unusual, because we live in a society where having lots to say and pushing forward is the way to make your mark and prove your worth. Joseph teaches us something different. He shows us that strength of character is also found in standing back and being silent, and that our actions always speak far louder than our words.

So, during the days Christmas, when you catch sight of St Joseph in the crib, learn from him that it's okay to stand by and let others shine. Their light does not diminish your own. Learn too that it's fine not having much to say, the real worth comes in being there to listen.

But perhaps the greatest life lesson St Joseph teaches us this Advent is that we are capable of so much good, more than we might ever imagine possible, when we choose to play our part in God's plan. And the plan remains pretty much the same for us as it did for Joseph; to welcome Christ, to make room for Him in our lives, and to love Him. And how do we do this? Where did the adult Christ tell us we would find him? Here's a reminder.

'Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.'" Mt 25:34-37,40

Over Christmas trust that God can use you in His plan to bring light and love into our world. Look for Christ and love Him in all the people around you, remembering especially those who need special care. Offer them what you can. Not just money, but also your time and attention, a kind word, a listening ear, a smile, the promise of your prayers.

We know from scripture that Joseph valued time in prayer. It strengthened and guided him, and it can do the same for us. Let's take our lead from Joseph now as we make our closing prayer.

St Joseph, to you
God entrusted His only Son.
In you, Mary placed her trust.
With you, Christ became man.
Through you, may we understand
The wisdom gained from an open mind,
The courage nurtured by an open heart,
The strength found in silence,
The hope born from faith,
The value of patience,
And the legacy of love.
St Joseph, pray for us.

St Joseph has inspired countless Catholics throughout the ages. St Joseph's Missionary Society, also known as the Mill Hill Missionaries, is one example. Formed in England in 1866, today St Joseph's Missionaries work closely with Missio UK. Among the Societies main aims are solidarity with the poor and marginalised, concern for creation, and inter-faith dialogue. Today its priests, brothers and lay associates are drawn from and work in every continent, helping build up and sustain new faith communities in some of the poorest areas of the world. To learn more about Mill Hill and Missio's overseas work, visit missio.org.uk/about-redbox/

