



# LENT AND EASTER

*Reflections on St. Joseph with G.K. Chesterton*

*Compiled by the Staff of the Society of Gilbert Keith Chesterton*

Starry, Colossal, blinding, bare  
Look down out of  
sunshine Everywhere  
Lo: I am dust: dust too is fair.

St. Thomas [Aquinas] was,  
if you will, taking the  
lower road when he walked  
in the steps of Aristotle.  
So was God, when He worked  
in the workshop of Joseph.

There are saints in Christianity:  
but a saint only means a man  
who really knows he is a sinner.

Alone of all superiors, the saint does not depress the human dignity of others. He is not conscious of his superiority to them; but only more conscious of his inferiority than they are.

It is almost necessary to say  
nowadays that a saint means  
a very good man.

And by fatherhood we mean a natural and rational authority.

I was always fascinated by that mediæval notion of erecting a rudely carpentered stage in the street, and acting on it a miracle play of the Holy Family.

Christianity...did not deny the trinity of father, mother, and child. It merely read it backwards, making it run child, mother, father. This is called, not the family, but the Holy Family.

I stared at the joints of the walls and seats, and began thinking hard on the fascinating subject of wood. Just as I had begun to realise why, perhaps, it was that Christ was a carpenter, rather than a bricklayer, or a baker, or anything else, I suddenly started upright, and remembered my pockets.

A casual carpenter wandered about a string of villages, and suddenly a horde of rich men and skeptics and Sadducees and respectable persons rushed at him and nailed him up like vermin; then people saw that he was a god.

He may even (for all I know) be a sublime mystic, profoundly impressed with the ancient meaning of the divine trade of the Carpenter.

If it be the point that an emperor came to worship a carpenter, it is as artistically necessary to make the emperor imperial as to make the carpenter humble.

If we wish to make plain to plain people that before this shrine, kings are no better than shepherds, it is as necessary that the kings should have crowns as that the shepherds should have crooks.

The mystery is too deep for us,  
my wife,

The barren bears—and dead  
things come to life,

St. Joseph too found  
cherries on a tree

In winter time, come sing  
that song for me.

The things that now shine most in my memory were... a white wood that is still strangely mixed in my imaginative instincts with all the holy trade of the Carpenter.

I am more and more convinced that what is wanted nowadays is not optimism or pessimism, but a sort of reform that might more truly be called repentance.

If the critic had been approaching any of the common kings or heroes of history, it probably would have been true; that to find them in their homes would be to find them when they had laid aside the crown and sword, and the terrible postures of history. As the critic was approaching the perplexing Carpenter of Nazareth, it was not in the least true.

The purely human figure of the Carpenter, carved by carpenters or craftsmen as simple as carpenters, was already rising on shrines and pedestals far away, in the crypts of Rome or the niches of Rouen. There was something symbolic, like a mysterious repetition of the Flight into Egypt, in the way in which the Mother, carrying the Divine Humanity in her arms, took refuge in the Roman world of the West; and seemed still to be fulfilling some destiny even in moving continually westward.

St. Joseph held the tiny hand,  
Fast in his own;  
“What will life hold for Him  
When He is grown?”

But the upper room was a sort of lumber room, full of packages and things partially unpacked, and it seemed suddenly that [Mary] was standing there, amid planks and shavings and sawdust, as she stood in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth.

St. Joseph to the Carpenters said  
on a Christmas Day

“The master shall have patience and  
the ‘Prentice shall obey;

And your word unto your women  
shall be nowise hard or wild:

For the sake of me, your master, who  
have worshiped Wife and Child.”

Wood is the most sacred of all substances: it typifies the divine trade of the carpenter, and men count themselves fortunate to touch it.

The saints of Christianity are supposed to be like God, to be, as it were, little statuettes of Him. The Old Testament hero is no more supposed to be of the same nature as God than a saw or a hammer is supposed to be of the same shape as the carpenter.

Under sunset, at once softer and more sombre, under which the leaden sea took on a Lenten purple, a tint appropriate to tragedy, Lady Joan Brett was once more drifting moodily along the sea-front.

There would be nothing  
heathen about depicting the  
Christ child as playing with  
St. Joseph's tools, and knocking  
a nail into a nursery toy.

St. Joseph kissed the  
little mouth;  
“When He grows old,  
Our undying love is His,  
Our love untold.”

A man might have the essential of culture, without the remotest chance of having any falcon to fly, or the remotest claim to the possession of any shield to blazon. He might be the son of a carpenter.

The Victorians, caring only for their vision of nonsense, really thought only of the Walrus. They managed to forget the Carpenter.

All the most dramatic things  
happen at home, from  
being born to being dead.

I have some sense myself of the sacred duty of surprise; and the need of seeing the old road as a new road.

Yet that was the vital revolt and innovation of vows, as when a man vowed to be a monk, or the son of a cobbler saluted the shrine of St. Joseph, the patron saint of carpenters. When he had entered the guild of the carpenters he did indeed find himself responsible for a very real loyalty and discipline; but the whole social atmosphere surrounding his entrance was full of the sense of a separate and personal decision.

Working in wood is the supreme example of creation; creation in a material which resists just enough and not an iota too much. It was surely no wonder that the greatest who ever wore the form of man was a carpenter.

Little Child Jesus,  
Jesus dear Child,  
Mary, His Mother  
(‘twas Mary who smiled),  
Joseph, dear Father,  
see we kneel here,  
Tell us, oh tell us,  
may we draw near?

There is more of the wisdom that is one with surprise in any simple person, full of the sensitiveness of simplicity, who should expect the grass to wither and the birds to drop dead out of the air, when a strolling carpenter's apprentice said calmly and almost carelessly, like one looking over his shoulder: "Before Abraham was, I am."

I would say to all parents  
Do you take things equally  
How do you know  
that you are not  
In the place of  
Joseph and Mary?

And Saint Joseph, when he saw  
Christ asleep upon the straw,  
In great love he worshiped there  
Mary and the Child she bore  
Ave plena gratia  
Ave Rosa Mundi

“How do you know,” he said,  
clenching his hands slowly,  
“that this is not the house of the  
new Joseph and Mary?”

I do also say it is well to keep before our eyes the supreme adventure of a virtue. If you are brave, think of the man who was braver than you. If you are kind, think of the man who was kinder than you. That is what was meant by having a patron saint.

It was the Catholic poetry  
and piety that filled common  
life with something that is  
lacking in the worthy and virile  
democracy of the West.

If any modern man should say, “You make too much of the sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth,” it is a strictly logical answer to say, “It might or might not be too much for the sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth; it is not too much for the sufferings of Jesus Christ.”

If ever realism could be called ruthless, and ruthlessness could be called right, it is in the rending story of insult and injustice that has been embodied in the Stations of the Cross.

But for such fundamental facts, both mystical and material, such imagery of the Passion would long ago have faded with the dusty and stilted engravings of forgotten statesmen on the scaffold, or now neglected stoics falling on antiquated swords.

In every century, in this century, in the next century, the Passion is what it was in the first century, when it occurred; a thing stared at by a crowd. It remains a tragedy of the people; a crime of the people; a consolation of the people; but never merely a thing of the period.

[The Passion of the Cross's] vitality comes from the very things that its foes find a scandal and a stumbling-block; from its dogmatism and from its dreadfulness. It lives, because it involves the staggering story of the Creator truly groaning and travailing with his Creation; and the highest thing thinkable passing through some nadir of the lowest curve of the cosmos. And it lives, because the very blast from this black cloud of death comes upon the world as a wind of everlasting life; by which all things wake and are alive.

By rich men sold,  
by kings denied,  
O carpenter, O crucified  
Count on one striver at thy side,  
One watcher at thy cross.

But there has been in recent times a whole rally of protest, which really protests against the thing because it is sorrowful. There are any number of people now who would say, sincerely if superficially, that it is morbid to stand at all under the Stations of the Cross.

On the third day the friends of Christ coming at daybreak to the place found the grave empty and the stone rolled away. In varying ways they realised the new wonder; but even they hardly realised that the world had died in the night. What they were looking at was the first day of a new creation, with a new heaven and a new earth; and in a semblance of the gardener God walked again in the garden, in the cool not of the evening but the dawn.

Easter, which is the spiritual  
New Year, should be a time  
for the understanding of  
new thoughts and the  
making of new things.

There were already a great many people there when I entered, not only of all kinds, but in all attitudes, kneeling, sitting, or standing about. And there was that general sense that strikes every man from a Protestant country, whether he dislikes the Catholic atmosphere or likes it; I mean, the general sense that the thing was “going on all the time”; that it was not an occasion, but a perpetual process, as if it were a sort of mystical inn.

The cross cannot be  
defeated...for it is Defeat.

Endless expositions have not come to the end of it, or even to the beginning. When a cry was driven out of that darkness in words dreadfully distinct and dreadfully unintelligible, which man shall never understand in all the eternity they have purchased for him; and for one annihilating instant an abyss that is not for our thoughts had opened even in the unity of the absolute; and God had been forsaken of God.

Therefore the story of Christ is the story of a journey, almost in the manner of a military march; certainly in the manner of the quest of a hero moving to his achievement or his doom.

It is a story that begins in the paradise of Galilee, a pastoral and peaceful land having really some hint of Eden, and gradually climbs the rising country into the mountains that are nearer to the storm-clouds and the stars, as to a Mountain of Purgatory.

We are meant to feel that Death was the bride of Christ as Poverty was the bride of St. Francis. We are meant to feel that his life was in that sense a sort of love-affair with death, a romance of the pursuit of the ultimate sacrifice. From the moment when the star goes up like a birthday rocket to the moment when the sun is extinguished like a funeral torch, the whole story moves on wings with the speed and direction of a drama, ending in an act beyond words.



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