

Readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

18th December 2022

First Reading: Isaiah 7:10-16

The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, 'Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.' But Ahaz said, 'I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.' Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.'

Second Reading: Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. Through Christ we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Gospel: St Matthew 1:18-25

The birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

How many of you know a Christmas carol or song that is, at least partially, about Mary? It didn't take me more than a moment to think of several: Mary's boy child, Child in the manger, Mary had a baby, Silent night, O come all ye faithful (2nd verse), The holly and ivy...

What about Joseph? How many Christmas carols or songs can you think of that even mention Joseph? The only one I could immediately think of was 'Joseph was an old man'. An internet search led me to a few, including a beautiful one called 'Christmas Ballad' which begins 'Joseph and Mary were living in Galilee' ... but is still mainly about Mary.

Advent anticipation has been building over the last three Sundays. Now we come to the fourth Sunday of Advent, a day when our focus is perhaps more on the anticipation of Christmas, now very close, and not so much on Jesus' glorious return at the end of time that has been at least part of our focus on the preceding Sundays. This is the day when the candle on our Advent wreath is for the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of our Lord.

But this is not the year to hear the story of Mary's obedience to God's will for her young life. In our 3-year cycle of readings, this is the year when Joseph steps from the shadows to take centre stage on the fourth Sunday of Advent. Joseph who, like Mary, at the bidding of an angel, agreed to do something difficult and strange to further God's purposes in the world.

Joseph is a vitally important character in the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, and there is a clue to this in each of our readings today. Let me jog your memory:

Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! ...the Lord himself will give you a sign.'

In his letter to the Romans, St Paul speaks of 'the gospel of God, ...concerning his Son who was descended from David...'

And in our Gospel reading from Matthew, the angel says 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...'

I hope you've spotted it! It had been prophesied that the Messiah would be a descendent of King David, indeed God had promised David himself: 'Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever' (2 Samuel 7:16). It was through Joseph's lineage that it could be claimed that Jesus was Son of David.

Of course, it could be argued that this isn't really so, since the Gospels make it quite clear that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father. However, in today's passage, the angel tells Joseph that he is to name Mary's Son, Jesus. In that society, by naming the child, Joseph publicly accepted him as legally his child, thus justifying calling him 'Son of David.

The name given to Joseph by the angel, 'Jesus', is equivalent to the Old Testament's 'Joshua', which means 'God saves'. For early Christians of Jewish descent, this would have reminded them that it was Joshua, Moses' successor, who saved the people by leading them into the Promised Land. Here, Matthew is explicit that, through this later Joshua, Jesus, God will save people from their sins.

Matthew then goes on to quote from today's reading from Isaiah to show how the birth of Jesus was a specific fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, and that 'Emmanuel' means 'God is with us'. Matthew is using this story of Joseph to introduce two important themes of his whole Gospel.

The first of these themes is that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. Many scholars agree that Matthew wrote his Gospel primarily for a Jewish Christian audience. For them, that Jesus fulfilled the old prophecies would have been vitally important in recognising him as the Messiah. So here, Matthew says: 'All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet ...', and similar expressions occur a total of ten times throughout the Gospel. Other examples of prophecy fulfilled from Matthew's infancy narratives include Jesus' birth being in Bethlehem, the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt, and then making their home in Nazareth. And they continue right through to Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The second theme of his Gospel that Matthew introduces here is that Jesus is 'God with us'. Although he may have been writing for a mainly Jewish audience, starting with the meaning of 'Emmanuel' through his Gospel Matthew extends the repeated promises of God's presence with his people from the Old Testament to all Jesus' followers, both Jews and Gentiles. We see this in the final verses of the whole Gospel (Matthew 28:19-20) where Jesus tells his followers to 'Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations...' and concluding with 'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

For Matthew, Joseph's willingness to do what the angel had commanded made all this possible. Joseph could have rejected Mary and her child as we are told he planned to do – after all, he knew he was not the biological father. That would have been a standard response, even an expected response, to the situation he found himself in. He could even be commended for behaving kindly by choosing to dismiss Mary quietly to protect her reputation. Instead, we see the open-heartedness of an adoptive parent, called by God to go above and beyond, willingly taking on responsibility for another's child.

Like Mary, Joseph is a model of obedience to God's will, to the extent of fundamentally changing his life for ever. And he is a model of kindness, generosity and goodness towards those who are at risk of being shamed or excluded from society; such goodness that should be extended to all irrespective of whether or not they bear any responsibility for their situation. Mary, of course, did not, but acceptance and forgiveness is the first step to rehabilitating those who have made mistakes.

As we look to Christmas and the celebration of the birth of Christ child, the fulfilment of our Advent anticipation, let us remember that this story of hope, of Emmanuel 'God with us', and Jesus 'God saves', was made possible by the willingness of ordinary people to be obedient to God. Joseph takes his place among those who remind us that God's will comes to fruition by the faithful actions of individuals that may be barely noticed by others.