

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year A

The common element in today's readings is the revelation of the divine plan. God is shown to be acting on behalf of the people to bring about delivery from harm and new life in the Spirit.

Isaiah 7:10-14 Isaiah is a charismatic prophet but his ministry takes place in the royal court. The scenario in today's extract exposes the deep concern that grips the young king Ahaz because of impending invasion by two armies led by Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah, king of the northern kingdom of Israel, ruling from Samaria. These two kings had formed a coalition because the Assyrians under Tiglath-Pileser III were preparing to invade the northern kingdom of Israel. They had put pressure on the 20 year old Ahaz to join them, but Isaiah advised Ahaz to rely on God and not to trust in the dubious loyalty of allies.

This son, Isaiah affirmed, would be a sign that 'God is with us'

Ahaz was too unsure of the prophet's word and said it was not his place to test God. Isaiah retorted in frustration and said that God was fed up with wavering faith and would take the initiative to give the king a sign that Judah would not be invaded. The sign was that a young woman in the court who was pregnant would give birth to a son. This son, Isaiah affirmed, would be a sign that 'God is with us' (Heb. *'immanu* = with us; *el* = God). Immanuel is not a personal name but more a job description that emphasises the presence of God among the people.

At this point the Scripture editors leave us suspended, not knowing what happened next. As it turned out, the Assyrians attacked and defeated the coalition armies in 721 BC, and annexed Syria and northern Israel, leaving Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, untouched. A little by-the-way: the Assyrians deported a good number of the Israelite population of the northern kingdom (a common military stratagem to divide and weaken a country) and brought in people from their colonies. The coerced settlers intermarried with the northern Israelites, eventually giving rise to the mixed race of Samaritans.

Psalms 24 This liturgical song begins with a profession of trust in God who is the sovereign creator of all that is. It insists that only those who are morally clean are fit to enter the presence of the Mighty One. The psalmist reminds us that seeking unity with God through sound relationships with others is the secret of quality life.

Romans 1:1-7 Here is Paul introducing himself to a community that he did not establish and had not yet visited. It was written around 57-58 and may well be the last of his surviving letters. He identifies himself as a 'servant of Christ Jesus' and an apostle. The Greek verb *apostéllō* means to send out. So, the earliest use of the term 'apostle' was to describe one who was sent out or commissioned by a community to spread the good news abroad. Only later did the term apply more specifically to the 12 Apostles.

As part of his self-introduction, Paul is careful to point out that he shares faith in Christ with the community. This is tactically designed to forestall any suspicion or criticism from members of the Roman *ecclesia*. He declares that he has been given the gift and the commission as an apostle to go to different parts of the Roman world and bring faith in Christ to the nations.

Some English translations add the adjective 'pagan' to the nations, which is not only unwarranted but also misleading. For most modern Christians 'pagan' means 'godless' but this is not what Paul is implying here. The 'nations' simply designates those who have not yet heard of Jesus Christ. Paul says the Christians in the Roman community were once in that state of unawareness but he certainly was not suggesting they were atheists. They had their gods and goddesses and their belief in supernatural powers.

The connection of this passage to today's other readings is Paul's affirmation that Jesus was a descendant of David, Israel's classic messiah and saviour of his people. Jewish tradition maintained that the next great messiah would be from the line of David, and this is where Jesus fulfils prophecy and tradition.

Matthew 1:18-24 It is easy to appreciate the obvious connection of today's gospel passage with the first reading. Matthew gives an account of Joseph being told in a dream by a heavenly messenger that the pregnancy of his betrothed has been brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit.

His initial reaction to her condition was to terminate his marriage arrangement with Mary. In the custom of the day a marriage was only complete when the man took his bride into his home. So, Joseph wanted to avoid a) marrying an adulteress and b) exposing Mary to public shame. Matthew adds that Joseph was *dikaios*, a straight-up, decent and fair kind of guy, but also conscious of maintaining his loyalty to the requirements of Torah. Hence his dilemma. Addressing Joseph as son of David the messenger underlines the genealogy that Matthew had previously documented showing the connection of both Joseph and Jesus to Abraham and David.

Matthew is saturating his account with allusions to Scripture

To demonstrate the child's destiny, Matthew draws attention to the name he is to be given, Yeshua, the Aramaic form of the Hebrew, Joshua (*Ye-hoshua* = YHWH saves). He then cites the Immanuel passage of Isaiah 7:14 drawing on the Greek Septuagint translation. The Greek has the word *parthenos* for the Hebrew *'almah*, which means a young woman. What clouds the issue a little here is that *parthenos* means a young woman of marriageable age but also has the more nuanced idea of 'virgin'. The young woman in Isaiah's oracle is clearly not a virgin, but the ambiguity of *parthenos* allows Matthew to apply the prophecy to Mary's virginal conception.

Matthew explains how *immanuel* means God-is-with-us, which would seem an unnecessary clarification for his mostly Jewish community. It does, however, show that there were non-Jewish converts in the Matthean church who might have needed a translation.

Looking over the whole passage we can see that Matthew is saturating his account with allusions to Scripture. He even points to the not immediately obvious connection between Joseph and the Joseph of Genesis who was the favourite son of the patriarch, Jacob. Genesis 37 describes how, instead of killing Joseph out of envy, his brothers sold him to Ishmaelite traders who took him to Egypt, where he gained a reputation of being a gifted interpreter of dreams and was summoned by the Pharaoh to interpret his dreams. Matthew is showing these two Josephs receiving divine inspiration through the medium of dreams.

Matthew's stress on the *immanuel* prophecy demonstrates how the early Christian communities saw Jesus. Where David was the great messiah of Jewish history, Jesus was the ultimate messiah who fulfilled all prophecy. Where Israel's kings were respected as sons of God and were seen as representatives of God present among the people, the early Christians realised that no one was more God-with-us than Jesus, the unique Son of God. Matthew shows that it was all meant to be, according to the divine design.

Do I see the people I come into contact with as God-with-us? Can I relate to the divine in creation? Is my sense of mindfulness conscious of the *shekhinah*, the Divine Presence? After all, this higher level of consciousness is what is referred to in the Gospel of John (3:6) as being 'born of the Spirit,' living the life of the Spirit; living life to the full, achieving one's potential physically, mentally, spiritually.



To teach people how to live without certainty and yet without being paralyzed by hesitation is the lesson of learning acceptance. Anonymous



How many politicians does it take to change a light bulb?
Two—one to change the bulb and one to change it back again.

Why isn't the government displaying a Nativity scene this Christmas?
They can't find three wise men.

Laurie Woods