

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 18, 2016

Isaiah 7:10-14; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Today, while celebrating the last Sunday of Advent prior to the Feast of Christmas Day, we can associate with the greatest joy of the Blessed Virgin Mary who awaited the coming of Baby Jesus into the world. Anticipation and preparedness are the watchwords for this Sunday of Advent. Anticipation of the celebration of the birth of our Lord some 2000 years ago and the festivities, gifts, parties and family get-togethers which accompany that celebration. This long awaited king is born in modest circumstances with no earthly power or show. Yet our faith tells us to prepare ourselves for him. We have to be prepared because we are told that Jesus will come at the end of times and we will be judged by not just on whether we believed or not, but how we have lived out our belief. In the first reading Prophet Isaiah invites a king Ahaz to choose faith and God will offer him any sign he wishes. When the king refuses God himself gives him the sign of a saviour to be born. In the second reading Paul sums up his good news to the early Christians. He tells them that Christ is a descendent of David and Son of God. His divinity was revealed when he rose from the dead and was manifested as Son of God in Power. In the Gospel we are told about the events surrounding the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Joseph is informed in a dream that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. But he is the part of the divine plan of Salvation to be the Father of Jesus to give him the throne of David. Joseph who is specially chosen by God to be his instrument now enters fully into the mystery and assumes the role of a parent to guide the family. As the story unfolds we see Jesus as the model king: humble, compassionate, prayerful, loving and willing to sacrifice himself for the good of people.

In today's First Reading, we have the words of Prophet Isaiah about the birth of a child. Isaiah the Prophet speaks to the king in the name of Yahweh saying that he must ask for a sign from the Lord. King Ahaz is afraid and he refuses to ask for the sign as he has already sacrificed his son to the pagan god Moloch. Now when Assyria was ready to attack Israel he had made a pact with Syria their enemy. He was in a desperate situation to decide as it would cost the independence of Israel. Precisely at this juncture, when the king has vital resources in his mind, God sends Isaiah to awaken the king to another more vital resource, namely, faith in God. If the king chooses to walk with God, he would have nothing to fear. To convince the king of God's power Isaiah offers to grant him any sign he chooses. Ahaz now refuses to ask for a sign from God about the protection of Israel. But God on the other hand will not leave Israel to be destroyed. Hence the Prophet says that even though he did not ask for a sign due to his lack of faith, God will give him one. A young woman will conceive and bear a son and he will have a son who will be the save Israel from their enemies. He will be the Emmanuel. Ahaz has a son Hezekiah who was one of few good kings Israel had in those days and in him Judah experienced the renewal of God's promise to King David. Paul in today's Second Reading from the Letter to the Romans affirms that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, descended from King David as prophesied through Isaiah. The ancient prophets prepared God's people for the coming of the Messiah. He would be human

and would be the king. Further his divinity is revealed when Jesus is declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead.

Through Christ the first disciples received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of the Name of Jesus. This calling of obedience of faith is a calling to the entire human race. It is a calling to each and every one of us to feed upon the Word of God for our spiritual growth so that we may go forward to teach and defend the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus. Paul then speaks of the good news to be communicated to all people. He says that in order to believe in Jesus there should be someone who brings the message of good news. He will be the one to proclaim it and in order to proclaim he must be chosen and sent. Therefore faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the Word of Christ. Faith begins by hearing the Word of God, this followed by a personal commitment to obey the calling of our Lord in submission.

Today's Reading from the Gospel of Matthew provides us with the circumstances surrounding the virgin birth of Jesus. When Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. When reference is made to Mary being engaged to Joseph, it means that the marriage contract had been drawn up between Joseph, or his parents, and the parents of Mary. According to the Jewish custom, the marriage did not take place until such time as the groom had taken the bride into his house. The Gospel calls him a just man, meaning the observer of the law. It really meant that he could have followed the law and accordingly could have taken action on Mary according to the Law. But he wishes to withdraw quietly from the contract without making the event public. At this moment Joseph has a dream in which, the angel of the Lord tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. The angel then tells Joseph that the Son of Mary should be called Jesus because He will save His people. When studying the origin and development of the name Jesus, it is learned that it means "Yahweh is salvation." Here we see the obedience of Joseph. The Gospel tells us that when Joseph awoke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him to do; he took Mary as his wife. We admire the total obedience of Joseph and his submission God's will.

We now turn to Mary as she is presented in the Gospel. She was told at the annunciation that nothing is impossible to God. She is informed that even Elizabeth in her old age is going to have a child of her own. God can work miracles with any person. Here we see the faith of Mary. She had to face an enormous challenge to her fidelity and trust in God and to the reactions of her family and of Joseph, the person she chose to marry. She was asked to assume a burden of tremendous responsibility, to be the Mother of God. It had never been heard of before that a child could be born without a natural father. Mary was asked to accept this miraculous conception even against the laws of nature. That required deep faith and unbroken trust in God and in his promises. Second, Mary was not yet married and becoming pregnant outside of wedlock was not tolerated in those days. Mary was only betrothed to Joseph, and such an engagement had to last for a whole year. She was asked to assume a great risk and she was aware

that she could be rejected by Joseph, by her family, by all her own people. Mary knew that they may not understand the mystery without revelation from God. She nonetheless believed and trusted in God's promises and says once again your will be done.

Matthew in the Gospel clearly affirms the virgin birth of Jesus. However, he also wants to communicate a sense of how dramatic this divine action was. While Luke presents the infancy narrative through the main character of Mary, Matthew builds the story around the person of Joseph. In both accounts there is an angelic appearance: in one case to Mary and in the other to Joseph. Mary is told in Luke's gospel that she is to bear a son. When she says that she is still a virgin, she is told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and her child will be the Son of God. In Joseph's case, he is told not to be afraid to take Mary home as his wife because the child with whom she is carrying is of the Spirit of God. The stories presented in both the narratives are different but the central message is the same. Mary is the mother of the Child but Joseph is not the father and he is given a new mission.

Here in today's Gospel we are presented with the custom of the time. Mary was betrothed to Joseph and this meant that she was legally bound to him by contract. This was often prearranged by the parents or a matchmaker while the would be couple were still young children. Marriages were primarily seen as the union of families and the continuing of the family line. Now Joseph discovers she is pregnant and we are told it is by the Holy Spirit and not others including Joseph. We can see then Joseph's serious dilemma, not to mention his feeling of shock, when he found that his betrothed was already pregnant and not by him. And imagine the feelings of Mary herself in this position. How was she to explain that she was pregnant by the power of God. The scriptures tell us that Joseph is a just man and in fact the best of descriptions are given of him. Rather than expose Mary to public humiliation, he plans to keep the matter quiet and end things privately. Then comes the dream like that of Joseph of Old Testament and Joseph here obeys the dream. According to Matthew all this happened to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah that a virgin will conceive and bear a son. While the historical Isaiah was not thinking of Jesus when he said these words, Matthew and early Christians understood that Jesus fulfills this prophecy. All of this was part of God's plan and not just a selection of random events. The story ends on a high note with Joseph taking Mary as his wife. However we all know that this is not actually the end of the story but only the beginning.

The Gospel passage of today stresses that Jesus was born of a virgin by the work of the Holy Spirit. In the Jewish thought the Holy Spirit had certain very definite functions. The Holy Spirit was the person who brought God's truth to men. He taught the prophets what to say or do. Secondly, the Holy Spirit enabled men to recognize that truth when they saw it. The Jews connected the Holy Spirit with the work of creation. Through him God did all his creative work. The prophets like Ezekiel accepted that the work of re-creation was done through him. In the vision of the valley of dry bones the cause of breathing will make them alive. The liturgy wants us to understand that Jesus came into the world through the power of the Holy Spirit to re-create life. Jesus will enable us to see what God is and what man ought to be.

It was Joseph who was the prophecy's hope. In contrast to King Ahaz, Joseph had confidence in the confusing sign of the child mysteriously conceived in Mary the Virgin. Despite the problems involved, he accepted the responsibility, because he saw in it the will of God. As a descendant of David, Joseph will become the legal father of Jesus the Messiah. And Jesus will be called later in the Gospel, "Son of David". Eleven times altogether in his gospel Matthew indicates how events in the life of Jesus are fulfilments of Hebrew Testament promises. Here he quotes the prophet Isaiah and says that the child will be called Emmanuel, which Matthew explains as meaning "God with us". Jesus will be the very presence of God the Father in our world. Again, John says in his Prologue: "The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us." The effectiveness of that presence depends on our conscious union with Jesus and with the vision of his Gospel lived out in our daily lives. Let Jesus be really re-born in each one of us this Christmas. The Lord wants to enter into our hearts. Our dispositions should not be like those of king Ahaz who did not trust the Lord, did not trust in divine power to save but he trusted in human means, the alliance with Assyria. We should be like Joseph and Mary who put their total trust in divine providence. As we continue with the celebration of the Holy Mass, let us pray for all Christians that they may prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord and welcome Jesus like Mary and Joseph, to receive his joy and peace.

Many years ago, when a social worker worked as a volunteer at a hospital, he got to know a little girl named Liz who was suffering from a rare & serious disease. Her only chance of recovery appeared to be a blood transfusion from her 5-year old brother, who had miraculously survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to combat the illness. The doctor explained the situation to her little brother, and asked the little boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. All saw him hesitate for only a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, "Yes I'll do it if it will save her." As the transfusion progressed, he lay in bed next to his sister and smiled, as all did, seeing the colour returning to her cheek. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked with a trembling voice, "Will I die right away, or how soon?" The boy had misunderstood the doctor; he thought he would have to give his sister all of his blood in order to save her. WOW!!.....Beautiful. he loved his sister and gave everything.

In New York City, on a cold day in December, a little boy, about 10-years-old, was standing before a shoe store on the roadway, barefooted, peering through the window, and shivering with cold. A lady approached the young boy and said, 'my, but you're in such deep thought staring in that window!' 'I was asking God to give me a pair of shoes,' was the boy's reply. The lady took him by the hand, went into the store, and asked the clerk to get half a dozen pairs of socks for the boy. She then asked if he could give her a basin of water and a towel. He quickly brought them to her. She took the little fellow to the back part of the store and, removing her gloves, knelt down, washed his little feet, and dried them with the towel. By this time, the clerk had returned with the socks. Placing a pair upon the boy's feet, she purchased him a pair of shoes. She tied up the remaining pairs of socks and gave them to him. She patted him on the head and said, 'No doubt, you will be more comfortable now.' As she turned to go, the astonished

kid caught her by the hand and looking up into her face, with tears in his eyes, asked her. 'Are you God'? No, said the woman. I am only his child. The boy smiled and said. I knew it. You are some relation of his.

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