

4th Sunday of Advent A

First Reading Isaiah 7:10-14

Once again the Lord spoke to Ahaz and said, "Ask the Lord your God for a sign for yourself coming either from the depths of Sheol or from the heights above." "No," Ahaz answered "I will not put the Lord to the test." Then he said: "Listen now, House of David: are you not satisfied with trying the patience of men without trying the patience of my God, too? The Lord himself, therefore, will give you a sign. It is this: the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel, a name which means 'God-is-with-us'."

Second Reading Romans 1:1-7

From Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus who has been called to be an apostle, and specially chosen to preach the Good News that God promised long ago through his prophets in the scriptures.

This news is about the Son of God who, according to the human nature he took, was a descendant of David: it is about Jesus Christ our Lord who, in the order of the spirit, the spirit of holiness that was in him, was proclaimed Son of God in all his power through his resurrection from the dead. Through him we received grace and our apostolic mission to preach the obedience of faith to all pagan nations in honour of his name. You are one of these nations, and by his call belong to Jesus Christ. To you all, then, who are God's beloved in Rome, called to be saints, may God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ send grace and peace.

Gospel Matthew 1:18-25

This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins." Now all this took place to fulfil the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, a name which means "God-is-with-us". When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home.

Meditation

In the history of Israel, the exodus event shaped the story of creation. In the formation of the gospels, the memory of Christ's death and rising shaped the accounts of his birth and infancy. Much more than stories about a precocious child with remarkable relatives, the infancy narratives are the clear expression of the early Church's belief that, from the first moment of Jesus' conception, God was at work in him. In relating the annunciation to Joseph, Matthew does not intend to consider the psychological reactions of his character. He simply wishes to answer the question, "Who is the Messiah?" For Matthew, Jesus, "who will save his people from their sins," is the ultimate inheritor of Israel, and it is Joseph who introduces him into the royal line of David.

Informed from the beginning about the impending birth, Joseph believed at first that he must remove himself from this mystery in which he thought he would have no role to play. Then God intervened. Indeed, the child whom Mary carried "comes from the Holy Spirit." But it is up to Joseph to assure Jesus' legal status by accepting him as his own son and giving him his name. It is necessary that through Joseph the house of David recognize in this son "God with us" (Isaiah 7:14).

We readily designate birth "a joyous event". What should be said about the waiting for this child in which Joseph plays a humble but indispensable role? The question here is not the history of one family among others, but the history of "God-with-us", the history of salvation.