

ADVENT IV SUNDAY (DEC.19 ,2010) IS 7: 10- 14; ROM 1: 1-7; MT 1: 18-24

A pastor tells the story of a worried mother who phoned the church office on the afternoon before the annual Christmas program to say that her small son, who was to play the role of Joseph in the Christmas Pageant, had a cold and had gone to bed on doctor's orders. "It's too late now to get another Joseph," the director of the play said. "We'll just have to write him out of the script." And they did! Joseph just disappeared! And only a few of those who watched that night actually realized that Joseph was missing. Joseph is often forgotten. But today's gospel is centered on Joseph.

The story of the virgin birth is at the heart of our Christmas celebrations. Hence, today's readings focus on the story of the virgin birth. In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah gives a sign from God to King Ahaz of Judah: "*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel*" Matthew considers this one of the most descriptive and definite prophecies foretelling the future messianic king, Christ, to be born as a descendant of David. Today's gospel, from Matthew, focuses also on the person and role of Joseph. In order for Jesus to fulfill the messianic prophecy given by Isaiah, Joseph had to accept Jesus as his son, making Jesus a descendant of David because Joseph was a descendant of David. Hence Matthew makes it clear that Jesus was not the biological child of Joseph. But because Joseph was the husband of Mary at the time Jesus was born, Jesus was legally the son of Joseph and thus a descendant of David.

This is the first of three occasions in which an angel appears to Joseph in a dream. In each instance, the angel calls Joseph to action and Joseph obeys. He doesn't have a speaking part. In this first instance, the angel commands Joseph to take Mary as his wife. In 2:13, the angel will tell Joseph to take the mother and child to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. In 2:19, the angel will, at the death of Herod, tell Joseph to return to Israel. The angel begins by saying, "Joseph, son of David," alerting us to Joseph's lineage. It is through Joseph that Jesus will be of the house and lineage of David. Mary's role is to bear a son, and Joseph's role is to name him. By naming him, Joseph makes Jesus his son and brings him into the house of David. An angel appears to Joseph three times. On each occasion, Joseph obeys the angel's commands without question or pause. His hallmark is obedience -- prompt, simple, and unspectacular obedience. And in this sense, Joseph prefigures the Gospel of Matthew's understanding of righteousness: to be righteous is simply to obey the Word of God. Joseph's obedience allows Jesus to be adopted as a true Son of David; it is Mary's role that allows Jesus to be born Son of God. In the end, Joseph took Mary as his wife, in spite of his fears, and he claimed the son as his own by naming him. In spite of his earlier decision to divorce this woman quietly, Joseph nurtured and protected and watched over and loved both Mary and her child.

Virgin birth: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called *Emmanuel*.” Matthew and early Christians understood Mary as the virgin and Jesus as the son in the prophecy given above in Is 7: 14, although the prophet probably meant Mrs. Ahaz and her son Hezekiah. In the Old and New Testaments, there are two meanings to the word, “virgin”: a Hebrew meaning and a Greek meaning. In Hebrew, the word, “*alma*” (“virgin”) simply means “young woman” as explained above. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and the Hebrew word for young woman is “*alma*.” But there is a second meaning of the word as well. Look carefully at the Gospel reading for today in Matthew 1:23. “Behold, a *virgin* shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called *Emmanuel*.” The New Testament was written in Greek, and the Greek word means someone who has not been sexually active with another person, who has never had sexual relationships with another. Eventually, the Hebrew Bible was translated into the Greek language, and the meaning of the word changed from *young woman* to one with *sexual virginity*. In the Old Testament, virginity, was a highly prized value. A virgin was someone who was precious. Rebecca was not merely a young woman; she was a virgin. The Bible is very emphatic about that. There were several laws to protect the virginity of women. That is, parents made arrangements for their daughters to be married, and they expected their daughters to be virgins.

Jesus the Emmanuel: The name Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Yehosua*, which means 'YHWH is salvation'. The first Joshua, the successor of Moses, saved the people from their enemies. The second Joshua (Jesus) will save the people from their sins. The people did not expect a Messiah who would save them from their sins, but one who would deliver them from their oppressors. The fulfillment of prophecy is important to Matthew. He mentions fulfillment of prophecy eleven times (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9). In Hebrew, *El* is a short form of *Elohim*, a name for God. *Immanu-El* means "God with us." *Emmanuel* describes Jesus' role or vocation. Jesus' calling is to save his people from their sins and to manifest God's presence. Matthew thus begins his Gospel with the promise that Jesus is God-with-us. He will end the Gospel with the promise that Jesus will be with us "always, to the end of the age" (28:20). Matthew understands that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, God is with us, reconciling the world to Himself. He is the reassurance in the flesh that God has not given up on us, but will remain with us. The real event of Christmas is that God comes to change the world and each of us -- not just through a historical virginal conception and a baby lying in a manger, but through the God who is with us today, shattering our self-righteous attitudes and seeking to move us beyond our fears, freeing us from our bondages.

We need to experience *Emmanuel* in our lives and change the world: God who entered our world through Jesus 2000 years ago *is* at work in the world. But the question is, if God has come to be present in our lives and our world, then why are there so many lives which are unhappy and beastly? Why are people so hostile, hating each other, and why do so many love-relationships turn sour? Why is there domestic violence and child

abuse? Why is there war in at least a dozen countries of God's good earth at any given time? Why are there so many people, homeless and hungry, even in rich countries? The good news and the consoling message of Christmas is that the child Jesus still waits today to step into our hearts—your heart and mine—and to change us and the world around us by the beauty of God's love, kindness, mercy and compassion. Let us take some time to let the Christ Child enter our hearts and lives this week, so that He may change our world of miseries with the beauty of that love.

The greatest Christmas gift we can give to those whom we love, is to have faith in them, believe in their dreams, and try to help them realize them. We need to believe in the dreams of our husband, wife, children, parents, leaders and friends, then try our best to help them realize those dreams. Have a wonderful Christmas.

JOKE OF THE WEEK

Jesuit Joke: A Jesuit, a Dominican and a Franciscan were walking along an old road, debating the greatness of their orders. Suddenly, a vision of the Holy Family appeared in front of them, with Jesus in a manger and Mary and Joseph praying over him. The Franciscan fell on his face, overcome with awe at the sight of God born in such poverty. The Dominican fell to his knees, adoring the beautiful reflection of the Trinity and the Holy Family. The Jesuit walked up to Joseph, put his arm around his shoulder, and said, "So, where you thinking of sending the kid for school?"