

## The fourth Sunday of Advent

Ahaz was king of Judah and he was in trouble. His country and his capital city Jerusalem had been attacked and plundered by his two northern neighbours Israel and Syria and he was frightened that they would return and finish the job. He planned to approach the strong and mighty nation of Assyria who could wipe out his two enemies without any difficulty. Isaiah was his prophet and advisor and said that he should not do this but would be better trusting in God. God would give the sign of a maiden who would give birth to a son who was Emmanuel, God with us.

800 years later Isaiah's prophecy came true and we hear the details from Matthew today. A maiden did in deed give birth to a son who is Emmanuel which means 'God with us' and we are preparing to celebrate his birthday next Saturday. The event which is proof that God loves us and the world so much that he sent his son to unite us with himself so that we might share his glory.

Before we reach that point of celebration, today is given us that we might enter more deeply into the response of Mary and Joseph, whose role was vital in bringing Christ to birth. To do this is important for us because they are given to us as models of how best to welcome God into our lives and, unlike Ahaz in the Old Testament reading, living our lives according to his will.

Mary was engaged or betrothed to Joseph, which as Matthew points out, did not mean that they lived together as man and wife. In those days marriages were arranged by families and the community. When the decision was made that a boy and girl should marry, (they were usually about 12), they were betrothed. The betrothal could last for years and often the couple would have little to do with each other. Eventually, when everyone decided the time to be right, the girl would be brought to the home of the betrothed by her bridesmaids and the marriage would be consummated and they would begin their life together under one roof.

It would be during her betrothal that Mary became pregnant with Jesus. It was more than likely that the local women in the village would be the first to know about the pregnancy when Mary stopped appearing in public, and Joseph would eventually have found out. The child was not his and he decided to divorce her informally which was the noble thing to do because if he had made an issue out of it Mary would probably have been stoned to death for adultery.

Matthew tells us that Joseph had made up his mind to do this when he had a dream in which he was told that Mary's pregnancy was more complex than he thought. He obeyed the instruction and took Mary as his wife.

Today's Scripture readings bring us a number of challenges and I would like to focus on two in particular.

The first is Joseph's response and obedience to the angel's message which was clearly from God. Caught in a very difficult situation he needed to make an important decision which he made by obeying the will of God. We've all been there in that we are making difficult decisions all the time, in fact every moment brings a need to make one decision or another. There will always be the temptation to make up our own minds about the way things should be and prefer not to follow the direction that God and his goodness is indicating. As the experience of Joseph shows, the best way, the way that brings new life and hope is to do as the Lord and conscience dictates. In a world that prefers the way of individual choice for pleasure and power, Joseph's example offers a challenging alternative.

Then there is Mary who is always offered to us as the most perfect model of discipleship and of what membership of the Church is all about. She became mother of the Word and Son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. This means that her life, guided by the Word of God, the scripture and recognising the daily presence and action of the Holy Spirit, was thoroughly in tune with God who could therefore work in her life achieving great things. Mary, freed from the doubt, fear and selfishness that darkens our own experience of life, came to see that in the story of humanity and creation God was not only a God of love, but because of his infinite love he wanted to share his life with us by becoming human and drawing us into his own joy and glory. How she did it we do not know but Mary came to see that she could be his mother and in that dialogue with the angel said with an act of absolute assent "yes, use me to complete your plan for creation and humanity".

Yes, she did remain a virgin and yes Jesus was conceived without any sexual contribution from a man. All because she gave her life and womanhood to God that he might use her in his work of creation. So connected was her relationship with God that the Word of God, which she knew so well in her heart and mind, became her own flesh and blood; her own son. It happened because God has the power to do it and because Mary wanted it in faith and a love beyond all telling. Such is our relationship with God that he is willing to turn upside down even the laws of nature as he so often did in the life of Jesus.

Mary listened to the Word of God and so must we. Like her we are invited to make daily and regular contact with the scripture in prayer and reflection. Like her we are called to ponder the daily events of life, both good and bad, so that we might see where God is leading us and how it is that he wants us to respond. Like her we are exhorted to put our whole lives into God's hands and to trust him with all our cares and uncertainties. Like her we must say each day to God "Be it done unto me according to your word".

