

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT A 07

There is a wonderful contrast between the story we read in Isaiah, and the Gospel story of Joseph's dream. As is obvious, Matthew sees the birth of Jesus as a fulfillment of that prophecy.

But there is the contrast between the men at the centre of each story.

Ahaz is, as one commentator has said; "an abject and lily livered king" ; whilst Joseph is both faithful and obedient.

Ahaz became King of Judah in 735 BCE; early in his reign the Kings of the more powerful Israel and Syria tried to force him into an anti Assyrian alliance. Failing in this these two invaded Judah and inflicted a severe punishment on it. At the height of the crisis the prophet Isaiah sought to encourage Ahaz to put his trust in God, but he did not. Ahaz preferred to seek help from Assyria. The result was devastating for Judah who would suffer severe trial until the fall of the Temple in 587 BCE.

Isaiah's message was, that before this particular child was but a few years old, Judah's enemies would be crushed - and indeed they were!

Isaiah's message, and Matthew's is like that we read of last week in the Song of Mary - God brings down the mighty and lifts up the lowly. God is the one who scatters the rich and arrogant, he reduces proud empires to dust.

God sides with the poor,
He lifts up the nobodies.

This was the good news Isaiah proclaimed to the people of his time – a people who feared powerful neighbours.

This is the Gospel, the Good News, Matthew was proclaiming to his people who feared the might and power of Rome might well crush them.

This is the good news to us today. There are powerful forces that might crush us, look at what is going on with the money markets!

But to us “Immanuel” “God with us”, is good news that offers us hope: the hope of being members of the Kingdom of God.

Matthew sees this prophecy, given by Isaiah, as being fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. God is now acting within history to work out his purpose.

John describes Jesus birth in this way: “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us”. And Matthew’s Gospel, like all the Gospels, is an extended meditation on this mystery.

Well, back to our 2 men. Ahaz rejected God’s sign and promise - suffering the consequences.

Joseph, on the other hand, provides a strong contrast. He is described by Matthew as being both righteous and compassionate. In what must have been both frightening and confusing circumstances, Joseph obeys God, cares for Mary; and of course, subsequently, for the child.

Matthew shows Joseph as offering an unquestioning acceptance of the word of God – what an example for us to follow.

In this story which forms our gospel for today two things occur:

1. Matthew describes how God is now among us. Through the message of the Angel, through the power of the Holy Spirit – Immanuel - God with us – becomes the new reality. A reality that will continue – for as Jesus proclaims just before his ascension: Matthew 28:20 (NRSV)

20**And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”**

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2. We are also taught how we should respond to God’s interventions: Joseph simply does what is asked of him – no questions, no ifs or buts – he does it!

Matthew 1:23 (NRSV)

23 “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

Christmas means “God with us”

Our celebration of Christmas reminds us that in the Incarnation God has become part of the human story.

And our celebration of Christmas challenges us to examine the quality of our response to the presence of the Divine with us.

As Mathew shows, Joseph leads the way - he shows us how to respond to God: just as in Luke’s gospel Mary shows us how to respond; there we read of her response to the message of God delivered by the angel: Luke 1:38 (NRSV)

38 Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

So as each Christmas comes and goes, the Church continues to proclaim that in Jesus, God is with us, and that Jesus is and will be with us until the close of the age.

So may our joy and our celebration be highlighted in our deep trust in God who

16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

[John 3:16 (NRSV)]

Can we respond like Joseph and Mary - especially when we are confronted by the words of Jesus in the sermon on the mount, which has such challenges as:

Matthew 5:43-48 (NRSV)

Love for Enemies

(Lk 6.27—28, 32—36)

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and

pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

What a challenge!

But one we can fulfill because “Emmanuel” -“God with us”

[1] <#_ftnref1> The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version. 1996, c1989. Thomas Nelson: Nashville