**FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

**19th December 2021**

**First Reading Micah 5:1-4**

Micah was a late eighth-century prophet, a contemporary of Hosea and Isaiah. The situation was like this. The Assyrian king, Sennacherib, had besieged Jerusalem in 701 B.C. The city was threatened and the Davidic dynasty was in jeopardy but Micah mysteriously says that rescue will come from the little hamlet of Ephrathah six miles to the south.

Ephrathah was the name of the clan to which King David's father Jesse belonged (1 Samuel 17:12) It was also used as the name for Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19; 48:7) The word Bethlehem was added in our text simply for those who did not know that it was the same place.

The village was insignificant in comparison with Jerusalem, yet the promised ruler will not come from the capital. The dynasty will not end with Hezekiah, despite Assyria. But relief will not happen immediately. This is the probable meaning of the reading when it says, ‘*The Lord is going to abandon them, till the time when she who is to give birth, gives birth*’ The Hebrew is as obscure as the English, but it sounds as if Israel will still be at the mercy of her stronger neighbours for a while until the new ruler begins his reign. Then the scattered Jewish refugees will be gathered together and the divided people will become one again.

Like Isaiah 11:1-19, our reading is some thirty years later than the Immanuel prophecy of 7;10-17. It seems that Isaiah, disillusioned with Hezekiah, looks to a future Messiah. The ruler will be the faithful shepherd of his flock, fully equipped by God for that office. With such a leader, so endowed, the people will have security, and he will bring the messianic blessing of peace.

The oracle certainly has in mind the Davidic dynasty, and so is an authentically Messianic oracle. It proclaims the coming of the Prince of Peace. And the woman of verse 2 is the mother of the ideal king to come, the mother of the Messiah from the line of David.

Matthew (2;6) saw the fulfilment of this oracle in the birth of Jesus, not least because though others thought that he came from Nazareth, Matthew knew that he was actually born in Bethlehem.

**Responsorial Psalm: 79;2-3, 15-16, 18-19**

The first stanza has ‘rouse up your might, come to our help’ The second appeals for protection for the vine, a metaphor for Israel and the third a prayer for a blessing on the Davidic king. Coupled with the first reading this may appropriately refer to Jesus Christ. Thus as we wait for his coming at Christmas, we put ourselves in a similar position to ancient Israel as they waited for the coming of the Messiah.

**Second Reading Hebrews 10:5-10**

Our second reading to-day, from Hebrews, is part of a doctrinal passage (10:1-18) which presents Jesus, High Priest, as the source of eternal salvation.

The author opens his argument by asserting that because the Mosaic law contains only a shadow of the future benefits and not the reality of these things, it can never, by the constant repetition of the same sacrifices year after year, make perfect those who seek to draw near to God. These sacrifices not only did not purify from sin, but their very repetition was a constant reminder of sin. And, anyhow, it was quite impossible that the blood of animals could remove guilt.

Hundreds of years earlier, a Psalmist had similarly predicted the ineffectiveness of all Levitical sacrifices, and that God preferred personal loyalty to legal compliance. See Psalm 40 or 39 v.7-9 (Different translations number the psalms differently, so the one you want depends on the translation you are using. If one of them does not make sense, try the other one!)

The author of Hebrews now attributes these words to Christ, at his birth (on coming into the world). The author’s point is that Christ is thereby demonstrating his obedience to his Father from the first moment of his incarnation.

The second paragraph is a comment on the psalm, reusing its application to Christ. It says that Christ has undone the old order and brought in the new. He has done so by expressing his willingness, through his obedience and sacrifice of self, to bring about the reconciliation between God and his people - something that the Levitical sacrifices could never achieve.

The sacrifice of Christ is not symbolic or a token gesture but the renouncing of his physical life. And it is the will of God that this obedience unto death be our sanctifying sacrifice offered once for all. The accent is on the will of God; it is by virtue of Christ's adherence to this will that his immolation is agreeable to the Father.

Popular thinking of Christmas and its preparation focusses on the birth stories, a time for presents, pantomimes, indulgence and far-fetched fairy tales. But we have this passage at the climax of Advent because, says the author of Hebrews, the whole raison d'être of the incarnation is the sacrifice of Christ. His Death was the reason for his Birth.

I remember a junior school teacher who rewrote the Nativity story so that Herod accompanied the Magi to the stable, instead of murdering the ‘Innocents’ She thought it made a nicer ending.

The choice of this reading today is a salutary reminder, needed particularly at this time of year, not to dissociate the incarnation from its supreme goal, the atonement. Bethlehem was the prelude to Golgotha.

**Gospel Luke 1:39-45**

In the three-year cycle, we get to read this story of the Visitation as part of a series of preparatory conversations setting the stage for the Nativity. Year A has Matthew’s Annunciation to Joseph. Year B has Luke’s Annunciation to Mary and the third is a meeting of Jesus and John Baptist before either of them was born!!!

Mary is portrayed as making her way in haste - a haste inspired by friendship and charity but yet more by her recognition of a divine invitation.

At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth felt the infant Baptist stir in her womb - John, from his conception, is precursor (1:17) of the Lord. Enlightened by the prophetic Spirit, she concluded that Mary is to be mother of 'the Lord.' That is why Mary is 'blessed among women,' a Hebraism, meaning the most fortunate of all women.

Three times Mary is pronounced "blessed" Two closely connected reasons are given for Elizabeth's calling Mary "blessed" One is her faith (v. 45), which is the obverse of her obedience and the second is her role as the ‘Mother of God’. (v. 42). So Mary is blessed, not for what she was or is in herself, but because of the Incarnation.

The four Evangelists introduce their Gospels in four different ways. Mark opens with the first appearance of Jesus in public. John takes us back to before Creation and before time. Matthew starts with his birth from a Jewish perspective and Luke from a universal one. A frequent mistake in understanding the scriptures is to try to harmonise different authors. We should instead treat each in isolation.

When we study the lives of any historical figures, we find stories about their births despite the fact that in no case had the writer actually been present. But, it was taken for granted that if a person became a pre-eminent figure in middle-age, then there must have been signs at his birth for the astute to decipher. So, stories were assembled, often after the eye-witnesses had died, demonstrating the inevitable career that history had determined for the hero.

This is true of Jesus as much as it is of any celebrated hero. It is not that the writers created an artificial legend, with no historical credibility. But it does mean that they took existing stories and emphasised some details which supported their interest while suppressing other more important ones that did not. There is an interesting possibility of that with this passage.

The moment Mary entered the room, John, from Elizabeth’s womb, sensed the presence of Jesus in Mary’s womb. Luke may owe something here to the story of Isaac and Rebecca in Genesis 25. Rebecca was barren, but Isaac’s prayer was answered and she conceived twins. During her pregnancy the two fought in her womb and later became two tribes, constantly at war with each other.

With imagination and hindsight, this feud could have been seen from their births. The elder and therefore senior of the twins was Esau, who was nevertheless challenged by Jacob the younger who during birth seized his heel as if to control him. This was what actually happened thirty years later and so with hindsight had been determined by God.

So, we have a parallel with John Baptist and Jesus. John was older, which in Hebrew society meant senior but for Christians Jesus was the senior and in this story John acknowledges the fact from the womb.