**FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

**18th December 2022**

The mood of Advent differs from that of Lent. Lent goes downhill from the start, beginning with Ash Wednesday through the penitential season to the depths of Passion Week and Good Friday—and then Easter bursts unexpectedly upon us.

Advent, on the other hand, starting in darkness, rises in increasing hope toward the full light of Christmas. This crescendo is reflected in the liturgical readings, which, beginning with the prophecies of Isaiah and John the Baptist, find their culmination on the fourth Sunday of Advent in a series of readings that focus on the Blessed Virgin and the annunciation of Jesus' birth.

**Reading I: Isaiah 7:10-14**

This is an example of how a passage which had one meaning originally, came to be used with a completely different sense and in different circumstances. This is not a habit that would win approval among historians today, but was common practice then.

First, there is the meaning of the text in its original historical situation. This situation is described in 2 Kings 16:5-9. The actual year fell between 736 and 732 B.C. Syria and Israel had attacked Judah. Isaiah tells Ahaz, King of Judah that in the time it takes for a young woman to raise a child to infancy, the Northern coalition will have collapsed.

The king's refusal to seek a sign comes not from piety but from the fact that he has already made up his mind to reject the prophet's advice. Threatened by a Syrian - Israelite alliance, he is determined to invite the intervention of Assyria; he has no confidence in the help of Yahweh. One does not so easily dispose of God: Ahaz will have his sign whether he wants it or not.

It is probable that the young woman in question was the Queen of King Ahaz and their son became King Hezekiah. (c.750 - c.651 B.C.) However, when the passage was translated for Greek-speaking Jews around 200 B.C., the word used to translate ‘young woman’ (parthenos) actually meant ‘virgin’. Very early on, Christians applied the passage to Jesus because it was well-known that his mother had been unmarried at his conception. Luke’s infancy narrative also echoes it (see Luke 1:31), thus indicating that this knowledge represents a common tradition.

**Responsorial Psalm: 23:1-6**

This psalm is used for Advent because it was originally written for the processional entry of the king into the temple. In our use it describes Jesus’ entry into the human world through the Tabernacle of Our Lady. We are doing no more here in using a text out of context than we did in the case of 2 Kings 16 above.

**Reading II: Romans 1:1-7**

This is the opening greeting of Paul to the Romans. Nearly all his letters were written to churches he himself had founded, but Romans was the exception.

We describe the Roman Church as ‘founded’ by Peter and Paul, but it is not as simple as it seems. It is unlikely to have been ‘founded’ by anyone, as a conscious act. Other Churches certainly had their founders, but there were Christians in Rome from the earliest moment. (Acts 2;10) Indeed, there were those who had been Christians long before Paul himself, and they may have been suspicious of what he taught. They are likely to have resented the authority over them that he took for granted. Part of the purpose of the letter was to reassure the Christians in Rome with what Paul believed to be the heart of the Gospel.

Paul wrote to the church to prepare the way for a projected visit. (Romans 15:22). He mentions the names of some thirty personal acquaintances, as if to establish credibility.

But when he did eventually arrive, it was as a prisoner under house arrest and he would not have had much freedom to be active in Church life. That would have been even less likely for Peter who was not a Roman citizen, but both Apostles were almost certainly martyred in Rome however, and naturally became the two names held in greatest pride by the members.

**Gospel: Matthew 1:18-24**

In the New Testament, the supernatural conception of Jesus figures only in the two annunciation stories in Matthew and Luke. Apart from these two stories Jesus is represented as the son of Mary and Joseph, which is what he legally was.

It is remarkable that both Matthew and Luke, whose infancy stories have nothing else in common, agree that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, his mother remaining a virgin. Clearly the common tradition is much earlier than either Matthew or Luke separately.

The real question is what the evangelists intended to convey in these stories. That seems to be an affirmation of faith in the transcendental origin of Jesus. He was not simply a product of human evolution. He is not just a remarkable example of humanity. He is the result of the presence of God in human history. The mystery which faces us at Christmas, and which faced the writers of the gospels, is the mystery which John so explicitly summed up in the words, *'the Word was made flesh*.'

We are faced with a historical fact, the birth of Jesus. We are also faced with the ordinariness of the circumstances. 'Is not this the carpenter's son?' (Matthew 13:55). But this human child is not simply a human being. Luke acknowledges the fact by speaking of the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary, so that the child born of her is the Holy One of God. Matthew here conveys the same idea but from Joseph’s point of view.

Matthew's infancy gospel, in 1:18-25 and 2:13-23, centres on Joseph. Joseph reminds us of the famous patriarch Joseph. Both were men of dreams. Both sojourned in Egypt. Both men could speak with authority.

The last verse of the genealogy (1:16) shows that Jesus is 'son of David' despite his lack of male parentage. The annunciation to Joseph is made during sleep, but on waking, Joseph immediately obeys the angel and marries Mary. The child’s Davidic lineage is through the agency of the carpenter as his Divine lineage is through his mother.

The child conceived through the Holy Spirit is ultimately divine - he is Son of God. Matthew is careful to spell out the meaning of the child's name: Emmanuel means God-with-us. (1;22-23) The significance of the name returns in the solemn assurance at the close of the gospel: 'And remember, I am with you always' (28:20).