

Today is the fourth Sunday of advent and we draw closer to what we all await – Christmas day - the birth of Christ. The stories that we have journeyed through so far this advent have prepared us in different ways for what is to come. We have heard about the need for our repentance and forgiveness, and how this continual rhythm nurtures in us a deeper perception. We have also heard about our need for awareness, watchfulness and calmness as we await the Christ child born into our lives.

Today, on the fourth and final Sunday of advent, we hear something of the nativity in the gospel of Matthew in which the focus is on Joseph rather than on Mary and the annunciation as in Luke's nativity account.

Of all the gospels, only in Matthews gospel is the character and role of Joseph as Jesus adopted 'father' developed. The gospel writer makes it clear in the opening chapter that Joseph is not the father of Mary's child, but that Mary is found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy and is keen to secure by acknowledgment the place of Jesus in the Davidic line even if it is by adoption. It is often felt that the genealogy of Joseph is irrelevant to the matter, if he was not believed to be the father of Jesus, and that the genealogy must have been composed independently of the narrative of the miraculous conception by people to whom the latter story was unknown. But, writes theologian Francis Beare, "This is to make the error of interpreting an ancient story in terms of modern ideas. The Jewish law and custom of the first century are presupposed throughout. Decent was not traced in the female line, and the mother could not transmit to her child the crown rights of the house of David, even if Davidic descent were claimed for her. The doctrine of the virgin birth, therefore, actually requires that the place of Jesus in the Davidic succession should be secured through adoption or acknowledgement by one who was himself a 'son of David' and this was to be Joseph. The genealogy and the story of the miraculous conception, accordingly, are not incompatible with one another, but complementary."¹

Matthew's gospel defines in spiritual terms the promise of salvation carried out by the one who saves, Jesus. As the gospel story develops we hear that this salvation however goes beyond the earthly dominion and its fight to rid the nation Israel from subjection to an alien power. God's salvation in Jesus is for all humankind and way beyond anything that would contain it to race or national terms.

In the gospel story today we are privy to a very personal story about Joseph and we hear of his tenderness first in response to Mary, then to God via the angel who visits him. Today's text tells us that Joseph is a just man, a righteous man.

In the Jewish tradition this implies that he is obedient to the law. Yet when he learns that Mary is pregnant he shrinks from exposing her publicly. Now according to the law in

¹ Francis Wright Beare. *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Basil Blackwell; Oxford, 1981. p67.

Deuteronomy (ch 22.21), if a woman was found guilty of un-chastity, she was to be stoned to death at the door of her father's house.

In making his choice to dismiss her quietly, Joseph put Mary and her welfare before all else. His response was one of compassion and went much deeper than the legalities of the law. Joseph witnessed to the true righteousness that Jesus later spoke of – that of the righteousness that exceeds the Scribes and Pharisees.

It is a noteworthy point, I believe, that it was after he had decided not to expose her publicly, but to dismiss her quietly, that the angel visited him and reassured him not to be afraid, because what was occurring was God's plan. And we may well be able to recall our times of crisis in our own lives when we have put aside our own judgements and self-centeredness and have instead put another first before all else. It often happens at this juncture in any given situation, that we become more open to receive a deeper perception of the situation and see it with clearer vision and understanding, and the fear that we cannot control it, subsides.

As the gospel narrative continues we hear that Joseph is to call the child Jesus - the Greek form of the Hebrew Joshua which means saves/helps. This name highlights the mission and purpose of the child and also fulfills the Emmanuel (God is with us) prophesy. In naming the child, Joseph takes it upon himself to be the legal father of the child.

The stories of Mary and Joseph in the gospels of Luke and Matthew have their own distinct focus, yet together they are centred on the conception and birth of the Christ child. All the concepts and teachings that we have journeyed with during advent in the readings and in our studies are, I believe, reflected in the positive response of both Joseph and Mary to God's call. Through their pondering, perplexity, patience, trust and deep perception they both responded to God's call with a positive "Yes."

I guess a question for us then is to ask ourselves, are we content enough to remain in our own private world of thought and activity, or do we dare get caught up in the adventure of God's way for us in the world – one of a love beyond all imagining.

In the first reading today God says to Ahaz, 'Ask for any sign you want, absolutely anything'. But Ahaz does not dare to. He pretends that he does not want to bother God. 'Far be it from me to tempt the Lord,' he says.

At this very Holy time of year when we are acutely aware of the birth that is coming may we respond not like Ahaz to God's call to let God take over his soul and guide him into his full potential, but may we be instead like Mary and Joseph who trusted in the call to find the holy condition of their being in God's plan for his kingdom on earth.

The Lord be with you.