

4th Sunday of Advent - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

Anticipation and preparedness are the watchwords for Advent. Anticipation of the celebration of the birth of our Lord some 2000 years ago and the festivities, gifts, parties and family get-togethers which accompany that celebration. Preparedness because we are reminded that Jesus will come at the end of the world (the parousia) and all will be judged – not just on whether they believed or not, but how they have lived out their belief. Are the end times near? No one knows but the Father. We must always be ready because our personal parousia can come at any time.

1st Reading - Isaiah 7:10-14

The attack of Syria and Israel on Judah was an attempt to force Judah into an anti-Assyrian coalition. Ahaz, king of Judah, resolved his difficulty, against the urging of Isaiah, by submitting as vassal to Assyria, whose king moved against Syria and Israel. The time is around 721 B.C. Judah is about to succumb politically and spiritually to the Assyrians and Isaiah has been warning Ahaz against this; while Ahaz's advisors have been urging him to give in. The Lord has been speaking to Ahaz through Isaiah and has said: ^{u7:7b} *This shall not stand, it shall not be!* ⁸ *Damascus is the capital of Aram, and Rezin the head of Damascus; Samaria is the capital of Ephraim, and Remaliah's son the head of Samaria.* ⁹ *But within sixty years and five, Ephraim shall be crushed, no longer a nation. Unless your faith is firm you shall not be firm!"*

¹⁰ [T]he LORD spoke to Ahaz: ¹¹ **Ask for a sign from the LORD, your God; let it be deep as the nether world, or high as the sky!**

This need not mean something miraculous (see Isaiah 37:30), but it should be something which will convince Ahaz that it is from God. Ahaz is to ask for confirmation of God's promise through Isaiah; something which will prove God's firm will to save the House of David from its oppressors.

¹² **But Ahaz answered, "I will not ask! I will not tempt the LORD!"**

Ahaz's refusal was undoubtedly motivated by his unwillingness to follow Isaiah's advice, he will depend upon the might of Assyria rather than upon God.

¹³ **Then he said: Listen, O house of David! Is it not enough for you to weary men, must you also weary my God?** ¹⁴ **Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign:**

The sign to be given is no longer to persuade Ahaz but will, in the future, confirm the truth of what the prophet has spoken.

the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son,

The Hebrew term used here (*almah*) is not the technical term for virgin, but may also be translated as “young woman”; a woman of marriageable age, whether a virgin or not. The oracles of prophets were usually fulfilled within the lifetime of the hearer, otherwise the prophet would have no credibility within his community. This does not preclude a secondary fulfillment later, but both aspects must be explored.

and shall name him Immanuel.

This solemn oracle is spoken by Isaiah before a royal court which is fearful lest the Davidic dynasty be overthrown. Such a catastrophe would mean the cancellation of the great dynastic promise made to David's house (2 Samuel 7:12-16). It was on the royal successor to David's house that Judah pinned her hopes for the welfare of God's people. The child to be born, therefore, may be the young Hezekiah in whose birth Judah would see the continuing presence of God among His people and another renewal of the promise made to David. Hezekiah's mother, at the time Isaiah spoke, would have been an *almah*. Nevertheless, the solemnity of the oracle and the name Emmanuel (God is with us) lend credence to the opinion that Isaiah's perspective does not stop at the birth of Hezekiah; it moves ahead to that ideal king of David's line through whose coming God could finally be said to definitively be with His people. This does not mean that Isaiah foresaw the fulfillment of this prophecy in Christ but he expressed the hope that Christ perfectly realized. Matthew and the Church, looking backward through the lens of the resurrection, have seen in the birth of Christ from the Blessed Virgin Mother the perfect fulfillment of this prophecy.

2nd Reading - Romans 1:1-7

Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans to a congregation which he did not establish – he hadn't even visited it yet. Paul was conscious that his apostolate in the Mediterranean area was over. Having preached “all the way from Jerusalem to Illyricum” (Romans 15:19), he looked westward to Spain. He planned to visit the Roman church en route, to fulfill a longstanding desire. Before heading west, he had to attend to one last matter: to carry personally to Jerusalem the collection taken up in Gentile churches that he had founded (Romans 15:25; 1 Corinthians 16:1) in order to manifest to the Jewish Christian mother church the solidarity existing between the “poor” of that community and the Gentile Christians of Galatia, Macedonia and Achaia. These Gentile Christians contributed to that collection, realizing that they had “shared in the spiritual blessings” of the mother church (Romans 15:27). So before he departed from Corinth for Jerusalem, Paul wrote to the Roman church to announce his coming visit. In Saint Paul's letters the greeting follows a standard form, though

he does use some variations. The three basic components are: name of sender, name of addressee; greeting. In identifying himself, Paul often adds phrases to describe his apostolic mission and our reading today contains one of the most eloquent of these descriptions.

¹ Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus,

The first of three descriptions of himself. This description reflects not only the Old Testament custom of the pious calling themselves slaves (servants) in the sight of Yahweh (Psalm 27:9; 31:16; 89:50), but especially its Old Testament use to describe the great figures who served Yahweh in salvation history [Moses (2 Kings 18:12), Joshua (Judges 2:8), Abraham (Psalm 105:42)]. Paul, as a servant of Christ, belongs to the same line. For a Roman to become a slave is quite a change.

called to be an apostle

This second description of himself emphasizes the divine origin of his apostolate. The event on the road to Damascus may be regarded as his call to the apostolate.

and set apart for the gospel of God,

This is the third description of himself. Galatians 1:5 explains that he was destined for this role before his birth. It is God's gospel because its ultimate source is the Father (Romans 15:16; 2 Corinthians 11:7).

² which he promised previously

Promised long ago. From this very beginning of his letter to the Romans (which is where we are in today's reading) Paul stresses that his gospel of salvation is part of a divine and ancient plan, in which even the Old Testament had a part.

through his prophets in the holy scriptures,

Not just the three major and twelve minor prophets of the Old Testament, but all the Old Testament persons whom the early church regarded as uttering statements regarding Christ.

³ the gospel about his Son,

God's gospel and the promises made by Him on the Old Testament refer to Jesus (according to Paul) who stands in a unique relation to God as His Son (Romans 8:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Galatians 4:4). Paul is going to affirm two things about the risen Christ.

descended from David according to the flesh,

This first affirmation asserts that Jesus was a son of David in the order of natural physical descent. He was a royal son with a right to the sacral anointing of a messiah.

⁴ but established as Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness

This second affirmation contrasts with the first. Although Jesus was the son descended from David on the physical level, he was set up as the Son of God with power on the level of the Spirit (as of the resurrection). As “life giving spirit” (1 Corinthians 15:45), Jesus is able to communicate the Spirit to those who believe in Him.

“Christ is the son of David in weakness according to the flesh but Son of God in power according to the Spirit of sanctification. ... Weakness relates to David but life eternal to the power of God.” [Saint Augustine of Hippo (ca. A.D. 393), *Explanation of Certain Passages from the Apostle’s Epistle to the Romans* 5,7]

through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This designates the resurrection itself as an influence in Christ’s saving activity.

⁵ Through him we have received the grace of apostleship,

Paul’s charismatic role as the apostle to the Gentiles came to him through the Risen Christ (Acts 22:10).

to bring about the obedience of faith, for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles,

The first (here) and last (Romans 16:26) mentions of faith in the Letter to the Romans are “obedience of faith”; this sets the context within which his use of the word “faith” is to be understood. Paul conceives of faith as a process that begins with hearing and ends with a personal commitment and obedient submission.

⁶ among whom are you also, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ; ⁷ to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy.

Literally, “called to be saints.” The Old Testament expression “holy gathering” was used of the Israelites at the Exodus (Exodus 12:16; Leviticus 23:2-4); it designated them as a people set apart and dedicated to Yahweh. Paul adapts the Old Testament expression and insinuates a new sense in which they are now “holy called ones (saints),” sanctified by baptism (Romans 6:22; 15:16; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 5:26-27). Christians are called to be saints in that they are called to make their lives conform to the gift they have already received (1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 4:7).

“See how often Paul uses the word *called!* ... And he does so not out of long-windedness but out of a desire to remind them of the benefit which calling brings. For since it was likely that among those who believed there would be some consuls and rulers as well as poor and common men, Paul casts aside inequality of rank and writes to them all under one common heading. But if in the most important and spiritual things everything is laid out as common to both slaves and free men, e.g., the love of God, the calling, the gospel, the adoption, the grace,

the peace, the sanctification, etc., how could it be other than the utmost folly to divide those whom God had joined together and made to be of equal honor in the higher things, for the sake of things on earth. For this reason, I presume, from the very start this blessed apostle casts out this mischievous disease and then leads them to the mother of blessings – humility.” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 391), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans* 1,7]

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Gospel - Matthew 1:18-24

Having heard of the Annunciation as the gospel reading for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, we now hear about Joseph and his reaction to the news.

¹⁸ Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together,

Betrothed (espoused) was more than engaged, it was considered married; although the groom had not taken the bride into his house, an event that took place on the seventh day of the marriage feast. Once a couple was betrothed, any children born were considered to be the legitimate issue of the couple.

she was found with child through the holy Spirit.

The virginal conception may be regarded as an outward physical sign of the invisible, inner reality, the birth of the Son of God.

¹⁹ Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man,

“Joseph” means “let him (God) add”. Some scholars suggest the original form of the name was “let him gather”. He is called righteous (upright) because of his desire to observe the Law.

yet unwilling to expose her to shame,

Levitical law required stoning of an adulterous wife (Deuteronomy 22:21).

decided to divorce her quietly.

Write a bill of divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1) as opposed to the trial by ordeal (Numbers 5:11-31).

²⁰ Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream

The angel of the Lord announces the birth of Samson (Judges 13:3) and here it announces the name of the child: Jesus (means “Yahweh is salvation”).

and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. ²¹ She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Matthew here exploits the meaning of the name which can be popularly translated as "God saves". The Hebrew name is "Joshua" which appears in Greek as *Iesous* which English transliterates as Jesus.

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

Fulfillment occurs eleven times in Matthew, more than the other three gospels combined.

²³ "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son,

Quotes Isaiah 7:14 (our first reading) according to the Septuagint except for "they shall call". The Septuagint says "you shall call". Matthew uses the text to affirm the virgin birth. His emphasis, however, seems to be more on the declaration of a savior who shall be called Emmanuel (God is with us), than on the word "virgin" (the Septuagint used the Greek word for "virgin" rather than the one for "young girl" as the Hebrew might have). The birth initiates the Messianic age of salvation to which the whole Old Testament looks forward. The age begins with the birth of a child. Jesus makes the presence of God among His people a physical reality.

and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us."

This name is fulfilled in the Holy Eucharist and also is fulfilled in Matthew 28:20 where Jesus declares "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age".

²⁴ When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.

The next verse "*He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus*" has caused trouble since the early heresies of the Helvidians and the Jovians who concluded from it that Mary and Joseph had marital relations after the birth of Jesus. "Until" doesn't always mean that something happens – I haven't been a millionaire until today, but I don't expect I'll be one tomorrow either. The Jews didn't believe the man had been born blind (John 9:18) until they summoned his parents; they didn't believe after that either.