

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Have we taken the time yet to have a close look at the nativity scene in front of our altar? One person who did said that with the figures out in the open as they are here, without a stable, then the whole church becomes the stable, and we are all around the manger together.

Someone else noticed the figure of Joseph. Joseph is totally absorbed in the child in the crib. We look with him towards Jesus, or where Jesus will be on Christmas eve.

When Matthew tells the story of how Jesus was born, he looks at that story through the eyes of Joseph. It is Joseph who directs our eyes towards the child in the manger. It through Joseph that God reveals who this child is for us.

We should not underestimate the very difficult situation that the conception of Jesus put Mary and Joseph into. Mary is described as being betrothed to Joseph. Joseph and Mary were already legally married, but as the custom was for someone who was quite young, Mary remained in the home of her parents for the first year or so of her married life. When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, he had the right to treat her as an adulteress. If he publicly divorced her, she could under the strict law be stoned to death. She would at least have had to suffer public shame for the rest of her life.

But without any divine revelation Joseph chose to spare Mary of that. He is described as a man of honour, a just man, a man who observed the law with mercy. In many ways Joseph showed the same kind of attitude towards the law that Jesus was to teach. Jesus must have learnt much about compassion from Joseph. He chose to divorce Mary privately. He was ready to write a letter of divorce giving Mary the freedom to marry another man, presumably the man whose child she was carrying. He was ready to do this when God revealed to him the true nature of Mary's pregnancy. "She has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit."

Joseph is told to take Mary home as his wife and to accept her child as his. He is told that he must be the one who names the child. Naming a child is the legal way of accepting a child as your own. Mary's child was adopted by Joseph in this action. Jesus became a Son of David by being adopted by Joseph. Because of what Joseph did, Jesus could claim to be the Messiah.

Joseph was told to name his child Jesus or Joshua, a name which means Saviour. Jesus was not to save people from political oppression, but he was to save his people from their sins. Jesus was to lift the burden of sinfulness from the shoulders of humankind.

Matthew tells us that all this happened to fulfil what the prophet Isaiah had spoken. More than any other gospel writer Matthew continually looks back to the Hebrew Scriptures to find things there that have their fulfilment in the life of Jesus. As we saw in our first reading today, the original prophecy would have applied to one of the princesses of the royal court giving birth to a son that God would use to show that God would not abandon his people; To show that God was ever with them, their Emmanuel. Matthew sees those words being fulfilled in a way far beyond what Isaiah could have imagined. Matthew quotes the Greek translation of the Bible, made about 200 years before Christ was born. There in Isaiah the Hebrew word for maiden had been translated into the Greek word for virgin. Mary is that virgin for Matthew. And her son is the God who will be forever with us: Emmanuel.

Matthew begins and ends his gospel with the assurance that our God has come to be with us. Jesus sends his apostles out to preach the gospel with the words, “And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.”

During this last week of preparation for the birth of Jesus perhaps we could be thinking and praying about how Jesus is Emmanuel for us. We can be thinking about the many signs that Jesus uses to let us know that He is with us. Of course, signs are funny things. They can be easily

missed or misunderstood. How often have we got lost because we missed a sign that showed us where we ought to be going? How often have we read the sign wrongly or had to ask someone else what a sign meant?

Signs of the presence of God can be like that too. Sometimes they can be too ordinary for us to notice them. The many ways in which we are loved by those close to us may not always be seen as signs of God’s love for us. Sometimes signs of God’s presence can be too challenging for us to accept them. A call to change or do something differently can be the Lord speaking to us.

We often miss signs of God’s presence. But when we do notice them, we can begin to appreciate the wonderful ways that God is at work. We can ask Joseph to help us attend to those signs of God’s presence. Joseph can teach us much. It was the love that Joseph had for Jesus that taught Jesus what fatherhood was all about. Joseph with Mary then taught Jesus how to pray to his Father. Joseph taught Jesus how to listen to God, as he did. He taught Jesus how to notice the world around him so that Jesus could tell those wonderful parables. Joseph can teach us still. At this moment Joseph can teach us how to be ready to welcome the one he named Jesus.