



***Fourth Sunday Advent***

***Isaiah 7: 10-14 Romans 1: 1-7 Matthew 1: 18 -24***

The reading from Isaiah links in a special way to the Gospel. The angel of the Lord quotes the passage to Joseph in his dream. The narrator wishes us to understand Jesus' story in the light of what has gone before. Much of the Christian story points to the ancient scriptures to enable us to understand what the evangelist is trying to explain.

Ahaz, King of Judah, was under attack by the kings of Israel and Aram. All Jerusalem was afraid. Their hearts trembled like trees tremble in the wind. God sent Isaiah and his son Shearjashub to the King. Ahaz was out in the fields looking for a way to protect the water supply. In a long siege the loss of water could be a deciding factor in the outcome. Through the prophet God tells Ahaz to ask for a sign. Ahaz refuses, perhaps because he is afraid. Sometimes when we are uncertain about an outcome to a problem we convince ourselves that we are better off not knowing. The worst outcome of this battle will be that the house of David will be wiped out.

Ahaz is given a sign. A young woman of his household, of marriageable age will have a son. This child will ensure the continuation of the line. In the midst of chaos a birth is a lovely sign of fruitfulness. This story takes us back to Sarah and Abraham. They, too, had to trust in an unborn child before they saw hope in the birth of Isaac.

The story also takes us forward to another man who is fearful, Joseph. The "enemy" threatening his peace of mind is his discovery that the woman to whom he is legally bound but who has not formally entered his house is pregnant.

Joseph, an honourable man, decided that he would divorce Mary, but privately as was his right. The alternative would bring a charge of adultery against her. Although Joseph chooses divorce he must have two witnesses and in a small town there will be some publicity.

For Ahaz, the message from God comes through the prophet, for Joseph it comes in a dream. This is Joseph's annunciation story. Like Mary he is told not to fear. Like Mary he is told that the child will be a sign of the creative presence of God. Joseph, like Mary, obeys. He accepts the role of father and the ceremony of bringing Mary into his house goes ahead. The story says, "He received her into his house." which has a lovely ring of gracious hospitality as well as love.

Joseph as new father names his son, Jesus providing Jesus with both legal paternity and a place in the royal line of David.

As the Gospel unfolds we see the significance of the reference to the child of promise being called, Emmanuel, which means God-with-us.

For Matthew, in Jesus, God is with us in a new way; in a way we could never have imagined. He concludes his Gospel with Jesus saying, "Know that I am with you always, until the end of the world."

This is Matthew's proclamation that Jesus is the Son of God.  
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