

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent. Christmas is about to begin. And the theme of today is directed towards anticipation of Christmas; anticipation of the presence of God in the human; of seeking and discerning God's activity in human events, and responding in faith.

First reading tells of an encounter between Isaiah and King Ahaz. Judah is being threatened by the armies of other nations, and the Lord sends Isaiah to Ahaz to assure him these threats will come to nothing. And by way of substantiating this, Ahaz is invited to ask a sign of the Lord, anything he wants. But in a fit of feigned piety, Ahaz says, I won't ask for a sign; I'm not going to put the Lord to the test. One can almost feel Isaiah's exasperation: You won't ask for a sign? Well, the Lord will give you a sign whether you want one or not! A child will be born, who will be named Emmanuel, a name that means God is with us.

The Gospel reading from Matthew's Gospel is the pre-Christmas part of the Christmas story - the Annunciation. We're most familiar with Luke's version of this story, which focuses on Mary; but here in Matthew's Gospel, Joseph rather than Mary is the focus. And there's something disturbing about this story.

Mary is pregnant; and Joseph is puzzled and alarmed and dismayed, because he knows that he's not responsible, he is not the source of what is happening to Mary. And so he seeks to distance himself from Mary, he plans to divorce her. And Joseph goes to sleep, and in that state of passivity, in a dream, what is really going on is named by the angel:
First: "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary...." The way Joseph was behaving was out of fear; he was afraid, he scared of what was going on. And his fear was named. And secondly, "the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" The source of what is going on is God.

As we consider the struggle between this man and this woman, Joseph and Mary, we can also see a reflection of the struggle that has been going on between men and women in our contemporary society over the past generation or two. Something has been going on with women, a very significant kind of "birth" is coming into being, something new and powerful is being born in the image and understanding and role of women.

And many men have reacted rather like Joseph; they're puzzled and alarmed and dismayed. They know that what's happening does not come from them, does not come from men. It's happening within women. Sometimes there has been fear; sometimes there has been a distancing, a divorcing, sadly a drawing apart, sometimes in mutual bafflement.

But this story of Joseph teaches us what really needs to happen. First, for many men it is to be able to name, accurately name, what is going on within themselves. And there are, I'm sure, many circumstances that lead to that fear being named. This story of Joseph really bit me in Advent 1989 - and some of you will know immediately what I am talking about; because in Advent 1989 one man, Marc Lepine, was unable to do that, and instead expressed his fear, or whatever it was, in bullets at L'Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal. I hope that in the 21 years since that tragedy, many men are been led to examine their feelings and attitudes, and to discover what is going on inside themselves. I suspect some have been surprised at what they discovered.

And the second thing is to take those other words of the angel, "the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit". For Christians this is the crux of the struggle: to discern what of the Holy Spirit is present in what's going on. It is not uncommon for the Holy Spirit to be at work in events of which we are afraid. And we should be asking, "Where is the Spirit's will for the future for both women and men?", and to expect to find some of that answer in what is going on in our contemporary society.

And both men and women have a role to play in the discovery of that answer. One last allegory: when what was happening to Mary came to fruition, when Jesus was born, it was Joseph that named him "Jesus" - which is a name that means "Salvation". When this struggle comes to its climax, it is Joseph who names what has come into being as Salvation. That is what it needs; it needs today's "Joseph", contemporary man to name for himself what is happening to women as a new gift of God; and because it is a new gift from God, to recognise it as "Salvation", and to identify what is happening as Emmanuel, God is with us.

To look at this scripture in this way does not, I believe, detract from the glory of the particular birth of Jesus. But what it does demonstrate is the extraordinary capacity of scripture to mirror human experience in every age. And so our remembrance of the events which surround the birth of Jesus are not just a reminiscing of what happened two thousand years ago; rather they're an opportunity for us to realise - to make real - the coming of Jesus into our world, and into our life. And not uncommonly that will involve recognising what is within us, the fears, the bewilderments, the sin - call them demons if you like; to discern what of the Holy Spirit is present in what's going on; to name God's work of salvation; to identify Emmanuel, God is with us. It is of such circumstances that Jesus continues to be born.