

Homily for 4th Sunday of Advent

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Isa 7:10-14; Ps 23; Rom 1:1-7; Matt 1:18-24

Theme: Do not be afraid!

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent and the last Sunday before Christmas. Our readings invite us to trust in the Lord. The context of the first reading is that the ten northern kingdoms of Israel had teamed up with the empire of Syria to attack the southern kingdom of Judah. When the people of Judah heard, ‘the heart of (king) Ahaz and the heart of the people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.’ (Isa 7:2). Then God sent Isaiah to Ahaz, requesting Ahaz to ask for a sign, but Ahaz said he would not ask for a sign. One would think that Ahaz was humble. The truth is that Ahaz planned to ask for foreign help to defend his kingdom. So, God was unhappy and said he would instead give him a sign: *ha-almah* is with child and will soon give birth to a son. *Almah*, literally in Hebrew, refers to a young woman of marriageable age. The best translation in English would be a maiden, a young woman with no marital relations. (cf. Gen 24:43 – Rebekah). Therefore, Matthew was right to use the word virgin for *almah* when it comes to Mary. In Matthew’s Greek, *ha-almah* is translated as *he parthenos*, which means “the virgin”. There is a Hebrew word for virgin, and that is *bethulah*. But since a maiden is expected to be a virgin until she moves into her husband’s house, Matthew interprets *ha-almah* as “the virgin”.

It is not clear who this young woman was. Still, if the prophecy refers to the son of Ahaz, the future king Hezekiah, it would indicate that his birth would be a sign of divine protection. There would be no need to be afraid of the enemies because the Davidic dynasty would continue. Suppose it refers to another child not yet known. In that case, the prophet was referring to a child who would be a sign of God’s presence and reign among his people to protect and save them from their enemies. And rightly, his name in Hebrew is a combination of two words *Immanu*, which means ‘with us’ and *el*, which is an abbreviation of the name of God. The child’s birth would signify that God is among his people. When God is among his people, they enjoy divine love, protection and care. We know that even after king Hezekiah, the prophets still anticipated this sign of divine presence. Therefore, the prophecy must be seen as futuristic, just as Matthew applied it to the birth of Jesus. Jesus is the actual Immanuel, the God with us.

The Gospel narrates how Jesus Christ came to be born. This narrative seems to be from the perspective of Joseph. Mary had been betrothed to Joseph. Betrothal meant that Mary and Joseph were already legally married, a legal entry into a covenant marriage. But they do not consummate the marriage until they move into their home. The bridegroom will build a house, and then there will be a seven-day celebration culminating in the procession of the bride into the home of the bridegroom. Only then is the marriage consummated. The gospel emphasizes that they had not moved in together before she was found with a child, meaning she was still a virgin. She conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. That is supported by the prophecy of Isaiah, which Matthew quotes and we have in the first reading. Joseph wanted to divorce her informally, but the angel of the Lord told him in a dream to take Mary into his home because she had conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Again, the virginal conception is the highlight. The name of the child will be Jesus, *Yeshua*, which means God saves because he is the one who will save his people from their sins. The mission of Jesus is contained in his name. But to save us, he has to take on our humanity *God-is-with-us*.

In the second reading, Paul states that what he preaches is the good news that God promised long ago through the prophets in the Scriptures. What is this good news? The Son of God took on our humanity – he descended from David and is Jesus Christ our Lord, the divine Son of God.

What are the lessons from the readings today? First, do not be afraid. Always trust in God. Ahaz and Joseph are given the same message, Ahaz by the prophet Isaiah and Joseph by an angel in a dream. The season of Christmas underscores trust in God. The child Jesus who comes to us comes to relieve us of fear and instill confidence and trust in God's presence. Second, openness to the divine will. In the case of Ahaz, he was not open to God's will. Still, Joseph takes a different approach in taking Mary into his home, thus, cooperating with the will of God. Third, Mary teaches us purity of heart through her virginal conception. Fourth, there is nothing impossible for God. We can absolutely rely on God's promises. Finally, this season invites us to proclaim the good news of Jesus. He is why we celebrate the season and should be part of our celebration.