

## **FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

### **Gospel: Matthew 1:18-24**

The birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.

### **REFLECTION 1:**

### **GOD WITH US**

Three teenagers were climbing a mountain when a massive blizzard struck. Luckily, there was a rock cave nearby to lend some shelter for the children to wait out the storm. For almost a week they huddled in the cave relying on scraps for nourishment. Finally, when they were low in food and hope, the weather broke. They crawled out of the cave barely able to stand. Looking down the mountain they saw a joyful sight – a rescue team! I believe that this true story of waiting and hoping gives us an insight into the situation of the believing Jews before the birth of the Messiah. They too were low on faith and hope. In our imagination we can picture the human race before the coming of Jesus. It was under Satan's power and control, sin and hopelessness everywhere and into this sorry state God sent the angel Gabriel to a virgin named Mary. Gabriel said to her 'you will become pregnant and give birth to a Son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king as his ancestor David was . . . and his kingdom will never end'. (Luke 1: 33-38).

We may wonder what went through Mary's mind as the angel left her. They meant more for her than merely fulfilling the words of the prophets – rather it meant a new world in which good would replace evil, love replace hatred and human brokenness would be healed. As Chesterton wrote, 'In Jesus all broken lines unite and in him all discordant notes blend in harmony'. Isaiah the prophet speaks of a virgin giving birth to a child who would be called Emmanuel – God with us.

Perhaps this short story may put our Advent hopes into perspective. On Christmas Day during World War 2, a young family was outside making a snowman. Suddenly a plane flew overhead. After it had passed the youngest child turned to her father and asked, 'Daddy, how do people get into the sky and into the planes?' 'The planes come down from the sky to collect the passengers' explained the father. I think that this child's question helps us to illustrate the mystery of Christmas. It celebrates the fact that we don't have to climb to the sky to reach God. God has come down to earth for us and we must ask ourselves where do we meet God on earth? Charles Dickens reminds us, 'It is good to be children sometimes and never better than at Christmas' – Emmanuel – God is with us!

## REFLECTION 2:

## GOD WITH US - EMMANUEL

'Don't be afraid!' said the angel to Joseph in a dream. This exhortation against fear, spoken in today's Gospel (Matt. 1: 18-24) enabled Joseph to shake off worries about Mary, about the coming child, about the need to do the right thing by his pregnant betrothed, as well as follow the law and keep the curious at bay. 'Fear not' or 'Don't be afraid' occur countless times in the Bible and each time the one who hears these words is assured that God is greater than any fear and that there is indeed an antidote to fear. For instance, God told Abraham 'fear not' before making a covenant with him. An angel said it to Zachariah, father of John the Baptist; while the Angel Gabriel similarly encouraged Mary. Angels said it to the shepherds startled by Christmas glory and Jesus said to the disciples when they thought the Lord to be a ghost walking on water. A voice at Jesus' transfiguration told Peter, James and John not to fear the moment and the same assurance was given to Mary Magdalene at Jesus' tomb. But in all of these circumstances the people had good and valid reasons to be afraid, reminding us also of all that makes us tremble in trepidation. How does 'fear not' speak to the loss of a job? The repossession of a house? A diagnosis of cancer? A son's or daughter's addiction to drugs or alcohol? The death of a loved one? The destruction and losses that natural disasters leave behind? How does 'Do not be afraid' even begin to speak to the tragedies of war, famine and diseases throughout the world?

The reason for this admonition is clear and simple: Believers should not live in fear or allow fear to stifle their spirit and down their hopes because through it all, and despite it all, Emmanuel, God is with us. This assurance, spoken by Isaiah as a sign to Ahaz (First Reading), was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ. Christmas, God-in-our-flesh, assures us that fear is not the critical or identifying mark of a Christian, rather at the heart of Christianity is God-with-us. At the very root of who we are as believers is the assurance that God is love and that 'perfect love casts out fear' (1 Jn. 4:18).

In the ultimate act of fearlessness, God trusted the divinity to human flesh and willed to be born of a young woman and be betrothed into a world of pain and struggle, suffering and dying.

Jesus entrusted himself to 12 friends, who were sometimes confused by him - later he was betrayed and deserted. Before dying, he entrusted himself in Word, Bread and in Spirit so that he might remain with us as guide, transforming all our fears into trust and faith. Christmas does not automatically cast out fear, but gazing at the Christ Child in the manger, we see the divine becoming vulnerable - the antidote to fear lives. God-is-with-us!