

# Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

## Fourth Sunday of Advent

### First reading:

(Isaiah 7.10-14)

*The Virgin is with Child*

The readings of the last Sunday of Advent always turn to Mary, as she waits for her child to be born.

The prophecy in this first reading was given in 736BC, when King Ahaz of Judah was about to be forced into an alliance, in a vain attempt to oppose the crushing military power of Babylon. Isaiah goes to him and warns him that the alliance would be fatal: he had better trust in the Lord.

Isaiah promises a sign, which Ahaz refuses. He does not want to be convinced! What is this sign? The original Hebrew reads: 'A girl is with child and will bear a son', indicating that within a few months the threat will vanish and Jerusalem will be convinced that God is on their side - hence the boy will be called Emmanuel, in relieved gratitude.

But the Greek translation of the Hebrew, made some 200 years before the birth of Jesus, translates "The virgin is with child", which the evangelist Matthew sees as a prophecy of the birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary. The symbolic name Emmanuel then becomes a promise of the presence of God in the world at our side.

### Question:

*In what way can we experience the presence of God?*

### Second reading:

(Romans 1.1-7)

*Son of God in Power*

This reading gives us the beginning of the great Letter to the Romans, in which Paul lays out the saving work of Christ.

After proclaiming his apostolic office, Paul lays out the two aspects of Jesus. In his introductions to the letters, Paul always briefly introduces or hints at the subject with which he is especially concerned in the letter. So here it is the dual aspect of Christ.

If Jesus were not both wholly human and the Son of God, his supreme act of obedience on the Cross would not have saved us. And yet, it is by his Resurrection that he lifts his followers to completion in the divine life, for we are baptized into his death and rise in his Resurrection.

According to his human nature, he is a descendant of David, wholly human. At the same time, he is Son of God in power through his Resurrection from the dead. Paul does not, of course, suggest that before the Resurrection he was not Son of God, but in some way the Resurrection put him in the position of his full power as Son of God. The Incarnation is the basis of all the theology of salvation.

### Question:

*What can it mean that Jesus entered into his power at the Resurrection?*

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## **Gospel:**

*(Matthew 1.18-25)*

### *Emmanuel*

Matthew begins his gospel about the birth of Jesus with a long and elaborately formal genealogy of Joseph. But Jesus is the son of Mary, not of Joseph!

The whole point of this story is that Joseph is not the genealogical father of Jesus, but adopts Jesus into his line of David. At first he is hesitant to do so, presumably thinking that he is unworthy to acknowledge the child as his own, and unworthy to bond with Mary who is with child by the Holy Spirit. But the angel insists ('Do not be afraid') that only Joseph can do this job.

As soon as the child is born, he is given the name Jesus, and given it by Joseph. It is the father's prerogative to name a son, and by so doing Joseph takes the child as his own. We hear little more of Joseph, but what a joy it must have been to have Jesus as a son! What a relationship there must have been! What responsibility, too! When Jesus calls God his 'Father', he is using the concept that must have been formed in his mind by his adoptive father, Joseph, the perfect ideal of the loving father.

## **Question:**

*What did Jesus and Joseph talk about as they walked to work together?*

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