

## Advent 4 – A Time to Love

Isaiah 7.10-16, Matthew 1.18-end

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord; our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, when we light a candle to remember Mary, mother of Jesus, we might expect to hear about *her* obedience to God. But today, we hear about Joseph, *his* acceptance of Jesus as his son, *his* obedience to the law, *his* love of God.

The passage just before the one we've heard is the genealogy of the Messiah in which Matthew lists the 42 generations between Abraham and Jesus. This is because Matthew has a very Jewish perspective on everything, and also because he is telling the story he believes is both true and the ultimate explanation of why Jesus was the person he was. And he asks us to see this story not in isolation, but in the light of the entire history of Israel in which God's *love* was always present and at work, often in very surprising ways.

Well if there is a surprising way, it is this. Matthew knows the story and he is convinced it is true: a young woman has conceived a son from the Holy Spirit of God. The living God would do such a thing, a new thing. The living God has come to dwell among his people to show them a new way. God loves his people that much.

### *The love of God*

The name Jesus was a popular boy's name at the time. In Hebrew it was the same as Joshua, who brought the Israelites into the promised land after the death of Moses. Matthew sees Jesus as the one who will now complete what the law of Moses pointed to, but could not produce itself. He will rescue his people, not from slavery in Egypt, but from the slavery of sin, the 'exile' the people have suffered not just in Babylon but in their own hearts and lives.

By contrast, the name Emmanuel, mentioned in Isaiah, was not given to anyone else, perhaps because it would say more than anyone would normally dare about a child. It means 'God with us'. And Matthew's whole gospel is framed by this theme: at the very end, Jesus promises that he will be 'with' his people to the end of the age. The two names together express the meaning of the story. God is present, he is always active, expressing his love.

This love, we find, is expressed in different ways through the Trinity.

The one we call Father is *God for us*. God's reality is founded on love. It is absolutely benevolent. God is protective of us. In our gospel story, God sends an angel to reassure Joseph: 'Do not be afraid' says the angel, familiar words that appear numerous times in Scripture. Do not be afraid to do God's will, follow in secret if you must, but do not let your fear or anything else distract you from trusting God.

The one we call Jesus, Emmanuel, is *God with us*. God walks alongside us, especially through the mystery of God's work: the birth of Jesus, his death and his resurrection. God made human has shared our condition. There is nothing that we experience that God has not experienced. So he is our rock. Without God, where is the reassurance we need in the world we live in? In contrast to God's loving reality, our world is a source of scariness and insecurity. In our gospel story, Joseph is confronted to a choice that exposes him to the condemnation of others and could lead him to be permanently excluded from his community; him and Mary of course, who could become a pariah for having conceived a child outside the bonds of marriage.

But Joseph focuses on his new priority and his divine mission. His eye is fixed on God. Joseph *chooses* to follow God's command. It is a choice, but one that is guided by a divine compass.

The one we call Holy Spirit is *God within us*. God coming to us as a tiny human being; God coming to Mary; God speaking to Joseph; God offering us a choice. God wants us to choose to love and serve him freely, not like slaves, but by following the divine compass that God offers freely.

God loved us first. Let us always remember that.

### *Our love of God*

And to this love, how do we respond? Do we have our eyes fixed on God? By what compass do we choose to lead our lives this Advent, this Christmas and beyond? Is there anything more that we can do to make a reality of God's love for us, our neighbours, our community, our world?

How about we take the words of the angel for ourselves? Do not be afraid... Do not be afraid to learn to live in the presence of the loving Father, even if it's daunting and awesome; learn to do everything for him and him alone; learn to keep our eyes fixed on God; learn to see God as a beacon of light shining in the darkness, guiding our decisions (what would Jesus do?), pointing us in the right direction, like he guided Joseph, showing us the way of peace and goodwill which is key to God's work for the whole of humanity.

Joseph had his pride. We read that he was faithful to the law: he was not supposed to marry someone who apparently had been unfaithful. But our gospel story shows us that pride can be left behind and love can become a reality.

Joseph had his fears. But he takes a risk, the risk of following the divine guidance that he probably does not understand and that is far greater than he is.

Through his act of obedience, Joseph enters into God's benevolent reality. He becomes a full participant in the new thing God is making: taking human flesh. He becomes an actor of God's will and therefore he helps to shape the time when God's will is done on earth as in heaven, because heaven and earth have been joined together in the new creation: the birth of Jesus, his life, his death, his resurrection. This tiny child that Joseph accepts as his earthly son is the one who conquered *our* enemy by the power of the divine love.

And so like Joseph, we are invited to respond to God's call and to put all our trust in God the Father who is for us, God the Son, who is with us, and God the Holy Spirit, who is within us.

Let us pray.

Almighty God,  
Open our eyes to your steadfast presence  
Open our ears to your voice of peace and goodwill  
Open our hearts to your unfailing love  
Open our minds to do your will and yours alone  
Open our hands to give generously this Advent and  
build your kingdom tirelessly  
This we ask in Jesus' name  
In the power of your Holy Spirit,  
Amen.