

## Advent 4; Year A; 22.12.13.

'Who are you?'

Two weeks ago, we heard about John the Baptist's proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom of heaven, his baptism of repentance and his prediction of the coming one who would baptise with Spirit and fire. The account in John's gospel expands on Matthew's by telling us that a delegation from the priests and Levites challenged him to say who he was. 'Who are you?', they demanded.

Last week it was John the Baptist's turn to ask Jesus. John, in prison, seems to have suffered some doubts about the message he had preached and whether he had got it right. 'Who are you?' he asks Jesus.

Today, we move on to part of Matthew's answer to that question. Who is Jesus?

Just before the passage from Isaiah that we heard just now, there is an account of an expected invasion by a couple of nearby countries. King Ahaz of Judah is fearful and pessimistic and Isaiah has come to reassure him and to counsel that he keep his nerve because they will not succeed and will themselves be overcome.

The sign that this is imminent is given in the image of a pregnant woman and an assurance that, while the child she bears is still young, the two kings that Ahaz dreads will be gone.

In the mystery of pregnancy and birth, Isaiah sees the hand of God giving new life and coming to deliver his people – the child is called Immanuel – that is, 'God is with us'. It is God who delivers, not military superiority.

Isaiah was prophesying in his own time and it is unlikely that he thought he was doing anything more. But today we cannot hear this read without thinking of the birth of Jesus.

Matthew says that the events of the Gospel reading took place to fulfil the words spoken by the prophet. Here is another pregnancy, one that is the result of a direct intervention by God and the child to be born will save his people from their sins.

Matthew doesn't give the details of the conception of Jesus as Luke does. He seems to take it for granted, commenting merely that Mary was found to be with child, after her legal betrothal to Joseph but before their union was consummated.

We can imagine Joseph's reaction of hurt and horror. A remarkable man, his concern was to make things as easy as possible for them both and not to demand the penalty laid down in the Law for adultery. He must have been a man of prayer, close to God because, as well as compassion, he showed great faith. I'm not sure that I would act so readily on something that came to me in a dream – especially when it was something quite preposterous in the circumstances.

However, he did so and, as the gospel tells us, did not have intercourse with Mary until after the birth of Jesus. So, Matthew says, Jesus is the Son of the virgin Mary, conceived by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit and she is the wife of Joseph.

Right at the beginning of the gospel Matthew writes of the ancestry of the Messiah from Abraham to Joseph as demonstration that Jesus is descended from Abraham and David, which seems to contradict what we have just heard. It is interesting that in St Paul's phrase in the NT lesson Jesus was descended from David 'according to the flesh'. By the time Jesus was born, Joseph was married to his mother and so legally was his father – after the flesh. Matthew sees this also as a fulfillment of prophecy.

Matthew is very concerned to answer the question of who Jesus is by demonstrating that he is the fulfillment of the OT prophecies concerning the Messiah. He repeats throughout his gospel that events

happened 'to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken through the prophets.'

He goes on to find fulfilment of that word when Jesus is born in Bethlehem; the king of the Jews; and the hope of the gentiles as represented by the homage of the Magi. He sees it, too, in the flight to and return from Egypt. 'Out of Egypt have I called my Son'. Hosea looked back to the Exodus but Matthew sees it as a reference to the expected Messiah.

Does all this matter? Are we not just coming up to the annual remembrance of a birth? A touching and charming account of a poor family without a roof over their heads, forced to bed down among the animals for shelter? Visited by people outside the respectable bounds of society and by travelling strangers?

It matters because it is a part of the whole action of God from the beginning. As Christians, we read the Jewish scriptures and from them we learn of God's plan for his creation; of his compassion for suffering humanity; of his promises and his faithfulness to those promises. That is why we find in the prophets, who wrote for their own times, another depth of which they were unaware. We find a foretelling of the time when this faithful God will act decisively, with an intervention that brings to reality all that is promised.

In Jesus we see that intervention. We realise the promise given through the prophets. We know in fact, what they could only hope for. God gives new life in the birth of a child and in this child – this child of the promise – he gives new life to all who will receive it. He is Emmanuel – God is with us. He is Jesus – Jehovah saves.

Apart from the declaration of Jesus as descendant of David, St Paul doesn't pay attention to the nativity. Rather he asserts that Jesus is declared to be Son of God by resurrection from the dead. That is the gospel to him.

I came across a poem, with a rather hurt cynical flavour, to the effect that Christmas is just for the children because it has nice things about it; but that Easter isn't because it deals with nasty, painful things – with nails and whips and it involves politics and the sins of the world. It suggests that people of a nervous disposition should just wait for a re-run of Christmas and not worry about what Jesus did when he grew up.

That just isn't true. There is one story, one action. All the events that we observe separately, the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus; his ascension and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost; the expectation of his return in judgement and glory is all one thing. We cannot have one part without the all the rest and each of our individual festivals includes the others.

When we know that, we may enjoy Christmas; we may sing, eat, drink, dance and rejoice that God keeps his promise; that he has visited his people and that he remains with us for ever.

### **Readings.**

Isaiah 7.10-16; Romans 1.1-7; Matthew 1.18-25.