

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT – A

On this fourth Sunday we are given Matthew's version of the Annunciation. In Luke's more familiar version it is Mary who cannot understand how she is to conceive, in Matthew's version in which Joseph is the main character it is Joseph who cannot understand how Mary is 'with child.' Joseph mirrors Mary's faith, accepts God's will and takes Mary home as his wife. Joseph learns of God's will for him in dream which he accepts in contrast to Ahaz, king of Judah in the first reading, who will not listen to God's word coming to him through the mouth of the prophet. Ahaz who says he will not test God by asking for a sign is given one: 'The maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will name Immanuel.' In the second reading we have Paul's opening address at the beginning of his letter to the Romans.

The **First Reading** comes from the prophet Isaiah, the first part of the book, chs.1-39. Isaiah was born about 765 BC and received his prophetic vocation while in the Temple in Jerusalem. His mission was to proclaim the fall of Israel and Judah as punishment for the nation's infidelity. He exercised his ministry for forty years and proclaimed his teaching in four distinct periods. It seems Isaiah finished his teaching by 700, after which date we know nothing of the prophet. There is a tradition that his life ended in martyrdom. His writings show Isaiah to be a poet of genius. The revelation of the transcendence of God and of human unworthiness he received in the Temple at the time of his call left a lasting mark on the prophet. For Isaiah God is an awesome God, a God who is Holy, Strong, the Mighty One, the King. We are his creatures defiled by sin for which God demands reparation insisting on just living among his people and sincerity in divine worship. Isaiah is the prophet of faith, he insists the people should trust in God in times of national crisis, by this alone will salvation be attained. Isaiah's hope is that a remnant of the people will recognise the Messiah for its King. This Messiah is to be a descendant of David. A prophet of considerable standing, Isaiah gathered round him a school of disciples who preserved his teaching.

The reading, 7.10-14, takes us back to the Book of Immanuel and a well known reading. The background to the reading is given briefly in the opening verses of the chapter. We are in the reign of Ahaz king of Judah from 736 to 716. Pekah king of the northern tribes (Israel) has made an alliance with Razon king of Aram (Syria) against the advancing Assyrian king Tilgarth-Pileser. Pekah and his ally want Ahaz, king of Judah, to join them to oppose the Assyrians but Ahaz refuses so they advance against him hoping to put a puppet king in his place. Isaiah meets Ahaz and tells him to keep calm and not to be frightened for the Lord says: 'This will not happen, it will never occur.....If you will not take your stand on me you will not stand firm.' Isaiah intervenes again and the reading now begins. Ahaz is told to ask for a sign that what God has promised will in fact happen. Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign saying he will not 'put Yahweh to the test' Yahweh nonetheless gives Ahaz a sign: 'the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel.' These words have been applied by the Church to Christ and our Lady and so accompany today's gospel reading.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 23.1-6, is a prayer for the solemn entry into the Temple sanctuary. The first verse states clearly the place of God and the second verse asks and gives an answer as to who can approach God's holy mountain. The final verse declares the rewards that such a person will receive from the Lord.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. Paul had not founded the Church in Rome but he intended to visit the Christians there on his way to Spain. This huge letter, with much detailed teaching, is difficult to summarise. The community in Rome was a mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish converts and there was a danger that they would look down on each other. Some of the converts from Judaism wanted pagan converts to be circumcised to ensure their salvation. Paul maintained this made nonsense of Christ's redemptive work. The Law was good and holy but made those who kept the Law aware of their need of God's help. This help has now been given in Christ Jesus which is explained in some detail.

The reading, 1.1-7, is Paul's opening address saying who is sending the letter and his mission, called to preach the gospel. Then he gives a brief summary of the gospel, it concerns God's Son and the power he received from his resurrection from the dead. Paul's mission to bring the nations to the obedience of faith and the Romans are among those called by Christ Jesus. Paul concludes by saying to whom the letter is addressed and closes with a blessing.