

## THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT – B

On this fourth Sunday of Advent we turn to the gospel according to Luke since Mark our gospel for this year says nothing about the birth of Jesus. We listen to Luke's account of how a virgin is 'to conceive and bear a son and you must name him Jesus', he will be a king, a successor to king David, and his reign will have no end. The virgin asks for some explanation and she is told she will conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit and further she is given a sign. Her kinswoman Elizabeth now beyond child bearing years is already in the sixth month of her pregnancy 'for nothing is impossible to God.' The virgin, Mary, accepts the angelic message. In the first reading we listen to the words of the prophet Nathan to David that 'your sovereignty will always stand secure before me and your throne be established for ever.' In the second reading we hear how the Good News is all part of God's eternal plan.

The **First Reading** is from the second book of Samuel which only briefly mentions the political consequences of king David's reign. The troublesome Philistines were repelled for good and the rest of the national territory was unified with absorption of many Canaanite enclaves including, importantly, Jerusalem which became the political and religious capital. David extended his authority further into Transjordan and to the northeast into southern Syria. Nonetheless when David died in 970, national unity had not been achieved and the two sections of his kingdom Judah and Israel to the north, soon found themselves at loggerheads again. The books of Samuel have a religious lesson. They reveal the conditions in which a kingdom of God might be expected to function and the difficulties that might be experienced. The ideal was only achieved in the reign of David. King Saul, before David, was a failure and their successors, by their sinful conduct, thwarted the growth of God's kingdom. It is the promises made in Nathan's prophecy, 2 Sam.7.15-16 that sustained and nourished the messianic hope through the centuries.

The reading, 7.1-5, 8-12,14,16, begins by telling us that king David is settled in his palace but is not happy because 'the ark of God is under awnings.' He discusses the situation with the prophet Nathan who advises him 'to go and do what you have in mind, for the Lord is with you.' But the Lord had other ideas and tells David through the mouth of the prophet that he is not to build house (a temple) for God, rather God is to build a House (a dynasty) for David: 'Your house and your sovereignty will ever stand firm before me and your throne be for ever secure.' It is to this prophecy that the angel refers in his address to Mary.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 88.2-5, 27,29 is a hymn and a prayer to God the faithful. The first verse refers to God's faithful love, as firm as the heavens. The second verse refers particularly to the 'covenant', the promise God makes in the first reading. The last verse is part of a messianic oracle in which God's love and his faithfulness are paired.

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 summarize. 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, 16.25-27, from the very end of the letter, is a doxology (here a prayer of praise) which is a solemn presentation of the main points of the letter. The prayer begins by giving praise to God who gives strength to enable the Roman Christians to be firmly grounded in the faith and in the practice of their faith. Paul speaks of the Good News as a 'mystery' of wisdom long hidden in God 'but now (as the prophets wrote) is revealed' so clearly, by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that it 'must be made known to all the nations.' This was the wisdom of God's plan revealed in the scriptures. So Paul concludes, 'to him, the only wise God, give glory through Jesus Christ for ever and ever. Amen.'