

This Sunday's Readings – the 4th Sunday of Advent – Today we celebrate the last Sunday of Advent. Christmas is just a few short days away where we will celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Again the first reading is from the book of the prophet Isaiah and contains one of his most famous prophecies. Ahaz was king of Judah (the Southern Kingdom) from 732 BC – 715 BC. Assyria was the dominant military power at that time. Syria and Israel formed an alliance against Assyria and asked Ahaz to join them. He refused. Syria and Israel then planned to invade Judah and force Ahaz to join them. Ahaz then went to Assyria for help against Syria and Israel. Isaiah warned Ahaz not to ally himself with Assyria as nothing good could come from such an alliance. Ahaz ignored Isaiah's advice. Ultimately, Assyria destroyed the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC and later on invaded Judah. Understand that Ahaz opposed God's plan that the king (Messiah) be from the House of David. He put more trust in the military might of Assyria than he did in God. Finally he sought Isaiah's help. That is the reason for Isaiah's rebuke. Isaiah then gives Ahaz God's sign - "the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel". Emmanuel means "God is with us". But was Isaiah really predicting Jesus' birth? Fr. Roger Karban in his 2001 syndicated column explains – "Despite Matthew's citation of him, Isaiah doesn't predict Jesus' birth in the first reading for the fourth Sunday of Advent (Is 7: 10-14). Only Christian fundamentalists believe the prophet's "virgin" is Mary and "Emmanuel" is Jesus. Since Pope Pius XII's 1943 encyclical "Divinu Afflante Spiritu," Catholic Scripture scholars are obligated to recreate the original historical circumstances of any passage they exegete. They must surface the problem which prompts the Sacred Author to write, the audience he or she is addressing, and the cultural and theological limits within which both the author and audience live. Only after those variables are established can we accurately begin to understand the message the author is trying to convey. When we apply this methodology to the first reading, we discover that Isaiah is giving King Ahaz a sign which has to be recognized instantly, not something which will take place more than 700 years later. Second, the word "almah," which we translate as "virgin," simply refers to a woman who has not yet delivered a baby. (Though we have no specific English word for such a human individual, we do have one for cattle: heifer.) An almah could be a virgin or someone 8.5 months pregnant. Finally, putting the above in the context of the historical problem Ahaz is facing (whether or not to join a Syrian/Israelite revolt against Assyria), the almah Isaiah mentions probably is Mrs. Ahaz and the Emmanuel is their soon-to-be-born son Hezekiah".

That prophecy is fulfilled in today's Gospel reading from Matthew. Here we hear part of Matthew's infancy narrative. Marriage in ancient Israel might seem a bit strange to us. First the couple was betrothed to each other, similar to today's marriage ceremony. However, married life did not begin until the groom brought the bride into his home, which usually was a month or two later. If the woman committed any infidelity during that one or two month period, it was considered adultery and the normal punishment was death. When Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, he could have had Mary put to death according to the Law. However, he was visited by an angel in his sleep. In the Old Testament, this was a very common method of communication between God and man.

The angel explained to Joseph how Mary conceived the child and who the child really was. Joseph then brought Mary into his home. Matthew repeats the quote from “the prophet”, who is Isaiah (remember the first reading). With the conception of Jesus by a virgin, the prophecy has been fulfilled according to Matthew. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2001 syndicated column explains – “Applying the same methodology to Matthew, we realize he probably knew little of Isaiah's historical situation (Mt 1: 18-24). No one did historico-critico analysis 2,000 years ago. They didn't have the tools. Biblical commentators simply associated every text with their own personal historical situation. Like modern fundamentalists, they believed the sacred authors had them in mind when they wrote. Can we use biblical historico-critico analysis to discover what God's doing in our midst today? Jesus' virginal conception certainly was a giant step outside the lines, not only for Joseph and Mary, but also for Matthew's community. That's why he mentioned Joseph's plan to divorce Mary "quietly." Writing for a Jewish/Christian Church, the evangelist must show that Joseph isn't a bad Jew: someone who would consummate marriage with a woman who had committed adultery against him. But because Luke and Matthew differ on who Mary and Joseph eventually discover the meaning of her pregnancy, some Scripture scholars believe that it first made sense to them after Jesus' resurrection. Historically, until their son rose from the dead, He could have caused quite a bit of tension between them. Could it be in the everyday tensions of our life that we most discover God in our life? That seems to be the way it usually happens in Scripture”. It is interesting to note that we have no written words even spoken by Joseph. We only have his actions and don't his actions speak volumes!

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* explains betrothal and marriage in the ancient Near East – “It would be wrong to consider betrothal as similar to our idea of engagement before marriage. Betrothal was the initial phase of the marriage process in which prospective spouses (commonly first cousins, see Gen 24:4; 28:20) were set apart for each other. Though a betrothed couple did not live together, a formal divorce was required to break the public establishment of the betrothal. Sex with a betrothed woman was considered adultery (Deut 22:23-24). In the ancient Mediterranean world, marriages were arranged by parents to join extended families and not individuals. The bride did not expect love, companionship, or comfort. In this rigidly gender-divided world, men and women had very little contact. Both partners realized that their union was arranged for the political or economic advantage of their families. The entire marriage process is a ritualized removal of a woman from her family. The groom's father offers gifts or services to the bride's father to win the wife he wants for his son. The bride's father makes the final decision. The women of both families negotiate the contract to be certain neither family is shortchanged, but the patriarch of each family ratifies the contract publicly. When the groom takes the bride into his home, the marriage process is completed (see Matt 25:1-12).

MARY'S PREGNANCY

Given the very nosy nature of Mediterranean village life, the separation of men from women, and the fact that the betrothed couple were not yet living together, Joseph may have been among the last to learn of Mary's pregnancy. Women would have noticed that she was not participating in their obligatory monthly ritual purification.

JOSEPH'S PREDICAMENT

The honor code of the Mediterranean world demands that no one take what properly belongs to another. Mary's child is not Joseph's, so he hesitates to take it. If he doesn't act quickly, he will be shamed. By law, Joseph is entitled to return Mary to her father and expose her to death. Numbers 5:11-31 describes the ordeal Mary would have to undergo. But Joseph is an honorable man and determines to divorce her leniently. His sense of honor hopes that the rightful father will seize this opportunity to claim the child and marry Mary. In all of his decision, Joseph acts very honorably.

THE WILL OF GOD

Our Mediterranean ancestors in the faith generally tried to live by the will of God. But how did God make his will known and how did people learn it? Ordinary folk had to rely on ordinary means. The prophet Joel (2:28) reports a proverb that captures a basic Mediterranean belief: "Old men dream dreams, young men see visions." That Joseph (Matt 1:20-21; 2:13, 19) and the astrologers (2:12) learn God's will in a dream is not only the ordinary way of learning God's will but also an allusion to their age. (Yet remember that less than 5 percent of the population lived to the age of thirty!) God personally announces to Joseph the gender of the child (a highly prized male is a special gift of God in this culture) and assigns his name (Jesus). This fact immediately immerses Jesus in honor far surpassing human calculation and further enhances Joseph's honorable reputation, for God would not honor a shameful person. In an effort to contemporize the biblical record, some modern preachers speak of Mary as a pregnant, unwed, teenage girl and describe Jesus' family as homeless. These clever descriptions are ill-suited to Mediterranean culture and are unfair to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. While the circumstances and embarrassment of Mary's predicament look similar to American experiences, the consequences in her culture are radically different".

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