

4th Sunday Advent (Year B) & Christmas Weekend: God keeps his promise.

1st Reading: 1 Samuel 7 (various verses): God promised David a ‘house’;
2nd Reading: Romans 16:25-27: Jesus revealed a ‘mystery hidden for ages’;
Gospel: Luke 1:26-38: The Annunciation: Mary obeyed God & conceived.

This is a strange weekend: Christmas effectively starts on the afternoon of the 4th Sunday of Advent, so I shall try to run the two ideas together. The Sunday gospel is the Annunciation story, where Mary, despite her worry and confusion, agreed to be the mother of a baby who would change human history. At the Christmas Masses on the Sunday afternoon & evening, parishes usually use the readings for the “Mass at Night-time”, rather than the vigil readings. On the morning of the 25th, the choice depends on the time: early on, it is the Mass of Dawn; later, the Mass during the Day. (If you have a missal, you can read them.)

The ‘infancy of Jesus’ stories in chapters 1 & 2 of both Matthew & Luke have a heavy ‘Jewish’ feel to them – even more so than in the rest of the gospels. This is because they describe God’s ancient promises being fulfilled in the events around Jesus’ conception and birth. I suspect that this may upset some modern readers, because there is a risk that the whole thing can sound like a fairy-story. I wonder if some of you reading these notes have thought that, whilst being too afraid or embarrassed to say so out loud? I hope I do not shock people by writing this, but many have said the same to me in the 52 years that I have been a priest! The point is that the theological style of Matthew & Luke chapters 1 & 2 is unique: it uses a set of stories to express the belief of the writers & the early Church that in Jesus, God stepped into the world in a miraculous (but still real) way. Matthew tells it from St Joseph’s side; Luke, from our Lady’s.

I should like to mix the Sunday & Christmas readings and treat them at two levels. The first is the official “theological” level – the fulfilment of promises going back into the Old Testament. Sunday’s first reading describes how King David, about 1,000 BC, wanted to thank God for being successful by building a temple – a “house” - for God’s presence. The prophet Nathan made it clear that this was not God’s wish. (The Temple was to be built later, by David’s son Solomon.) Instead, David was to establish a “house” for God in the shape of a royal family or clan (as King Charles belongs to the royal “House” of Windsor). A thousand years later, St Joseph, an obscure carpenter, who belonged to the much-diluted clan descended from David, gave his name to a baby born to his young wife, Mary, The child was not his own, but he bravely adopted him, and so made him also a member of “David’s house and line”. This is why the Holy Family had to go to Bethlehem for the Roman census – it was the ancestral place of the whole tribe or clan of David. Early Christians saw this as fulfilling God’s promise to David: *“I will establish your dynasty for ever, and set up your throne through all ages.”* (verse 2 of this Sunday’s Psalm, 88) This was to be a spiritual relationship, rather than a merely legal or physical one.

The second level is perhaps more interesting – we naturally wonder how Mary reacted. (Nowadays, BBC reporters would pester her for her ‘feelings’ about her situation...) Seriously, I think we can forget those Renaissance paintings of a lovely fair-skinned girl receiving the angel in an ornate building. Think instead of a 3rd World scene: a very young, swarthy woman in a hovel is shocked by having to accept an impending pregnancy. At the same time, she had great faith (“full of grace”) and knew that the child would be a special gift of God – not just to her, but to the whole human race. That is why she was told, “Do not be afraid”, and that her elderly cousin Elizabeth was also expecting a child. This prompted her ‘yes’: in old language, “*Be it done to me according to thy word.*”

The gospel of the Night-time Mass relates the well-known story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem (during his parents’ visit for that census), then the experience of shepherds in nearby fields. An angel told them: “*A Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.*” This mixture of the divine and the messy is at the heart of the Christmas story: the special child would be born into a shambles (rough wrappings and in an animal feeding-trough). The Dawn Mass gospel continues with the shepherds’ visit to the child: they told their story and “*everyone was astonished at what the shepherds had to say*”. We do not use Matthew’s equivalent story until the Epiphany (Jan 6th). There, the visitors were not local shepherds, but a group of ‘Magi’ – astrologers? - from “the East”. They were far more exotic, but the principle was the same: humans were bearing witness to a divine intervention, namely that a young virgin-girl had had a baby who would ‘save’ the human race. Their famous 3 gifts symbolised how this would work.

However, the gospel of the Day-time Mass is totally different, with no mention of the Christmas story at all. Instead, we have the Prologue to the 4th Gospel (John 1). For many (me included), this is the most magnificent writing in the Bible: it shows that Jesus existed from all eternity as “The Word” – God’s self-revelation and expression – who was part of the very process of Creation. The climax: “*The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth*”. That child in the manger, visited by rough shepherds then exotic Magi, was also divine, the ultimate symbol of God sharing (but not abolishing) our human plight.

I shall end with the 2nd reading at the Dawn Mass. Paul writes to Titus: “*When the kindness and love of God were revealed, it was not through any righteous actions we might have done; it was for no reason except his compassion that he saved us.*” In other words, the Christ-child and the salvation he came to bring were free gifts that we did not ‘earn’; they were the result of divine love. That sums it all up. Happy Christmas! *Fr Jim Dunne.*

