

Readings

Isaiah 7.10-16:

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. **Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.** ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Matthew 1.18-end

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Promise: Emmanuel – God with us .

Walter Brueggemann: God is 'a lively character and an active agent' in Sojourners, Jan 2020, p. 29

Christmas getting very close: on the one hand I am writing cards, wishing people peace and joy; on the other hand it has been a week where some of us at church have been close to people who unexpectedly have become very ill and then died; a couple of people we are close to who are having to go to Addenbrookes in Cambridge for major surgery, so close to Christmas.

This is not what we are expecting or hoping for this time of year – but, we should not be surprised. Yesterday was the shortest day of the year; darkness, cold and dampness are all around us, and many people are struggling due to all the rain we are having and a growth in flooding.

We are longing for peace, joy, relaxation – and there will be some of that, but not for everyone in the same way.

One of the things we often overlook in the run-up to Christmas and at Christmas itself is that the Bible accounts of Jesus birth, especially in Matthews' gospel is not a romantic or rosy story; on the contrary – Jesus birth' meant a great deal of upheaval and heartache for a great number of people – not least, Joseph, of whom God asked a huge amount and who is often overlooked when we think about major characters in the Bible.

Today's gospel reading is primarily about Joseph – and it reminds us of what the announcement of Jesus birth meant to him.

Joseph is faced with a very awkward & testing situation. His fiancé', his beloved Mary is pregnant ...and he is not the baby's father. It's not hard to imagine how deeply disappointing and hurtful that must have felt; as well as the embarrassment. Joseph had every right to publicly accuse Mary, shame her and break off the engagement.

Matthew tells us that Joseph is a righteous man; he who wants to do the right thing. And so he decides to act with compassion rather than vengeance. Despite his disappointment, sense of betrayal, his hurt, perhaps anger he does not want to expose her to public disgrace. He resolves to dismiss her quietly.

But into his human deliberations enters an angel, a messenger from God. In a dream he is shown the true meaning of what has happened to Mary. God is at work in Mary's life in a way that is beyond human comprehension. The angel treats Joseph like a friend who is shown the plans God has for him and the world. The child in Mary's womb will save his people from their sins, will bring salvation, healing to the world. The child is the promised Saviour.

Joseph is a religious man, steeped in the Jewish scriptures; familiar with the Jewish history, law and the prophets; familiar with God's promises to his people.

And so, Joseph trusts this dream. Matthew tells us 'When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife'. (Mt.1.25)

We can only guess if Joseph woke up the next morning and immediately knew that the dream was to be trusted, or whether he needed to ponder it as he went about his day's work realising that the words he had heard did indeed resonate with the teachings of his faith and the prophets. We heard the words the angel said to him in our first reading this morning:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.'
(Mt.1.23)

Name the child 'Emmanuel' – God with us! And that's all Joseph has to hold on to!

His situation could hardly be more complicated ...there he is, with a wife, pregnant, but not his child; a wife, he is not to have marital relations with. How is all of this going to look to their family and neighbours?

As the story unfolds things don't get any easier – he and Mary end up in overcrowded Bethlehem with no place for them to stay, and then as refugees with a tiny baby escaping to Egypt.

'They shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us'.

Perhaps those words became the most important words for Joseph and Mary, whose situation required them to live by trust in a way that none of us want to find ourselves in.

Let's face it: for Joseph and Mary the Christmas story is one tough event after another – with bits of light and joy thrown in, but overall a huge mess and a very big ask!

Their lives are turned upside down; when Joseph got engaged to Mary he must have looked forward to a nice, cosy home, with him running his carpentry business; Mary the homemaker and mum of his children. Instead, he finds himself the step-dad and protector of God's son – away from home and on the road for years.

The Christmas story offers the promise for us too:

God is with us. God is in the mess! Just as God was active two thousand years ago, God is active now – God's promise is that God is with us.

This time of year we are very aware of the darkness and sadness, perhaps in our own lives; in other people's lives. It is into this darkness that God comes as a vulnerable baby, entrusting God-self to people like Mary and Joseph. And their faith in God with them enables them to be such an important part of God's story in the world. They trusted God's promises to their ancestors and the prophets; they trusted in God's promise of steadfast love. Each day, as it was unfolding with all its challenges and worries.

During Advent, we are invited to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ at Christmas; to listen to the stories of God's presence and to relate this to our lives, so we notice God's presence with us. In Advent we are reminded that God is real and active in the world. Do we actually believe that? That we are part of God's story if we allow God to be at work in our lives; if we are 'hospitable' to God; if we trust God to be with us in the mess.

The Christmas story is not at all a cosy story -though there are big moments of joy and bliss. The Christmas story is about real lives and the promise of God's love right there with us – and for us to notice when God is coming to us -quietly in our hearts, through a dream or the loving presence of family / friends or even strangers. Amen.