

4th Sunday of Advent, Year A

GOSPEL

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This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph; being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.' Now all this took place to fulfil the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel,

a name which means 'God-is-with-us.' When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home.

(Matthew 1:18-24)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- In Matthew's Gospel, Joseph is the main protagonist in the infancy narrative, while Luke's story of the birth of Jesus centres on Mary and her response.
- There are significant differences between the two accounts, which can be understood as reflecting the particular theological perspective of each author and the way each seeks to point to the identity of Jesus and address the concerns of his own community.
- Did you notice that there is no stable or manger in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth? Jesus is born at the home of Joseph and Mary, who live in Bethlehem. Look at the birth stories in Luke (chapters 1-2) and in Matthew (chapters 1-2) and see who visits the infant Jesus.

EXPLORING THE WORD

In Palestine, the betrothal period was akin to our period of engagement but was somewhat more binding. The couple are considered married but have not yet come to live together. An indiscretion of the nature described by Matthew requires a formal divorce and thus public knowledge. Joseph seeks to spare Mary this public disgrace, but God intercedes and alerts Joseph to the real identity of this child, which is in her 'by the Holy Spirit'. For Matthew, this is the most important point of his infancy narrative. The child Jesus is the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy that the maiden will conceive 'God-with-us'. God has freely chosen to come among people. The second important point in this text is Joseph's response. The anguish and turmoil he must have felt is overcome by his trust in God's ways, and he obeys. He simply 'did what the angel told him to do'. Through his trust and acceptance of God's will, human history will never be the same because 'God-is-with-us'.

- You could tell something of the story of King Ahaz (featured in the first reading) and his disregard of God's commands and compare this with the response of Joseph.
- What does this convey of the nature of faith?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Have you ever undertaken a bold and trusting action, even though you were dubious about the outcome?
- How was your trust rewarded?
- Spend some time thinking about how each of these characters would feel: Mary, the young maiden, who finds herself inexplicably with child; Joseph, the man who must have doubted her fidelity and felt betrayed by her. Each character took a great risk in accepting this situation as God's will and being willing to see where it would take them.
- Have you ever had the experience of having made up your mind to do something, only to have doubt cast on your chosen path by an 'inner sense' or 'gut feeling'? How well did you trust in your own intuition? What was the outcome? Conversely, have you ever taken a great risk, with little idea of the outcome but with a willingness to follow that path wherever it may lead? Share your reflections.
- Try to be intuitive to God's voice this week. What is being communicated to you at this time in your life?
- Learn by heart and pray often one of the most loved prayers of the Church, the Hail Mary:

*Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with you.*

*Blessed are you among women
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

