

Bible Study

Fourth Sunday of Advent, cycle A

Opening Prayer: (Sign of the Cross) “Lord God, when your people wandered in the darkness of sin, you sent the True Light to live among them and reveal to them the God whom they longed to know. The darkness of sin still lures your children from the path of light. Reveal yourself to us again today in your Word, and light our path with your truth so that we might prepare well for your coming. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Focusing Questions

1. Tell about a time during this past week when you knew for certain that “God is with us.”
2. How did you know which vocation (religious, priestly, married or single life) or career God wanted you to pursue, whom God intended for you to marry (if you married), or where God desired you to live?

Commentary before the First Reading: Isaiah 7:10-14

Every prophecy has at least 2 meanings: the immediate point for those to whom the prophet spoke his words and the larger implications that others can see in looking back later. This reading is one such prophecy. King Ahaz was a weak leader of the kingdom of Judah who, wishing to appease those who were opposed to his rule, offered sacrifices to pagan idols as well as to God. When his people and throne were being threatened with capture by the armies of Syria and Samaria, Ahaz prepared to make an alliance with the hated Assyrians, in which they would defend Judah from those northern kingdoms and allow him to continue as their puppet ruler in the Southern Kingdom, while collecting taxes from his fellow Israelites for his Assyrian overlords. Isaiah came to him with God’s challenge that he trust God’s promises more than a foreign military power.

Read the First Reading aloud.

1. When God invited Ahaz to ask him for a favor, what limits did God place on that request?
2. Is the reply from Ahaz one of piety or one of pretended piety?
3. Ahaz had a very young wife who later gave birth to Hezekiah, who succeeded his father on the throne and was a very good king. In what way did that already fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy?
4. What larger implications do Christians see in this prophecy?
5. What does the name “Emmanuel” mean?

Commentary before the Second Reading: Romans 1:1-7

Saint Paul did not found the Christian community in Rome, as he had in the other places to which he wrote letters. He may have known a few individuals, but he did not know most of the Christians there. That is why he wrote such a long introduction of himself at the beginning of this letter. Holy Mother Church chose it as the Second Reading for today’s Mass because of its thematic connection to the First Reading and the Gospel.

Read the Second Reading aloud.

1. When Saint Paul refers to himself as a “slave,” what does he mean?
2. Find the phrase which says that God promised long ago to send Jesus as our Savior.
3. Now find the words that establish Jesus’ blood relationship with the great King David.
4. Verses 1 and 5 are still used to speak of the ordination of a bishop. Cite the two requirements for becoming a bishop, as Saint Paul speaks of them here.
5. What, according to this reading, is the destiny of every baptized person?

Commentary before the Gospel Reading: Matthew 1:18-24

Saint Matthew’s account of the conception and birth of Jesus includes many details that are not part of Saint Luke’s account. This reading has one of those details. Joseph was understandably upset by the news that Mary was pregnant; he knew the baby was not his offspring. Notice that the angel calls Mary “your wife.” Betrothal was a formal religious commitment for the Jews, even stronger than our engagement. Often, at some time after betrothal, the woman moved into the man’s home as they worked together to save the money needed for the Jewish wedding celebration. Joseph’s dedication to doing the right thing allows us to see how the hand of God guided and protected the Holy Family from the very first days of their relationship.

Read the Gospel Reading aloud.

1. Do you have a favorite line from this reading? Comment if you wish.
2. Which word provides the reason that Joseph did not expose Mary to a public stoning for adultery (which he had a legal right to do under Jewish law regarding adultery)?
3. From which parent did Jesus trace his ancestry back to King David?
4. “Jesus” (another form of “Joshua”) was not an unusual name in Hebrew families. It meant “rescuer, helper, deliverer.” Why do you think Matthew felt the need to add the reason for giving the child the name Jesus? (Hint: see the beginning of Question 6 below)
5. Does the fact that the child was not named Emmanuel falsify or negate the prophecy in the First Reading? Explain why or why not.
6. Saint Matthew wrote primarily for Jews who had become Christians. How would the reference to Isaiah 7:14 have helped those readers accept the Good News about Jesus?
7. Do you see anything unusual about how readily and whole-heartedly Joseph accepted these instructions about Mary and the child that she carried? (hint: look again at verse 20)

Applying the Readings to our Daily Lives

1. Have you ever accepted something from a dream as being what God wanted you to do? Tell the story, if you can.
2. When we face a difficult or puzzling situation, how can we discern what is most likely the will of God?
3. Do you ever think of yourself as a slave or a servant, just following orders from your Lord, your Master? Is that a freeing approach to the Christian life or one that imposes unwelcome boundaries?
4. Can you give an example of a person choosing compassion over legal justice, as Joseph did? What makes that the correct choice in some situations?

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, when your mother Mary placed her life at the service of your Father’s divine plan, you humbly took flesh in her womb, leaving the eternal glory of heaven for the sake of weak and sinful people, and coming as a helpless baby. Turn our minds to watchful expectation, so that we will be alert to your presence and prepared by your Holy Spirit to welcome your arrival in our own lives. Come, Lord; do not delay. Amen.