



Madonna and Child, by Guido di Pietro or Beato Angelico (1400-1450)

THE ADVENT OF CHRIST

Scripture Reflections to Prepare for Christmas

Week 4

From Nazareth to Bethlehem: The Holy Family

The Fourth Sunday of Advent - The City of David

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. *Luke 2. 4-6*

One of the families on the move as a result of Augustus's decree of a census is the family of Joseph. Being from the house and lineage of David, Joseph must travel to Bethlehem. He takes his pregnant wife with him to be enrolled in 'the city of David'.

On one level, the story of Mary and Joseph's travelling to Bethlehem highlights Caesar's worldwide dominance, which reaches all the way into the life of this couple from Nazareth, forced to leave home in spite of the imminent birth of their child. On another level, however, Luke is showing that there is someone else who is *really* in control of the world's affairs; for Caesar's powerful decree ironically serves God's larger plan for the Messiah-King to be born in his proper city, Bethlehem.

Bethlehem had royal significance for the Jews. It was the city where David was born and was anointed king (1 Samuel 16. 1-13). Most of all, Bethlehem had been associated with longings for the Messiah ever since the prophet Micah foretold that a new king would come to reunite the people of Israel and reign over all the nations. According to Micah, this new royal son, like David, would be born in Bethlehem:

'But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days' (Micah 5. 2).

Caesar, in his show of might with the worldwide census, unwittingly ends up serving the purposes of an even more powerful ruler, God himself. As a result of Caesar's decree, Mary and Joseph are brought to Bethlehem and prophecy is fulfilled as a new king is born in the city of David.

For Reflection

Do I see God as being in charge of my life? In control of what happens in the world?

Prayer

Lord, help me to accept the challenges of this life with a firm belief in your love for me and in your power to bring all to the good. Amen.

Monday of Advent 4 - Emmanuel

'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel' (which means, God with us). *Matthew 1. 23*

Matthew quotes this famous Emmanuel prophecy from the book of Isaiah (7. 14) and reveals its fulfilment in Jesus. Isaiah uttered this prophecy during a crisis in the kingdom of Judah in the eighth century BC. Foreign armies threatened to invade Jerusalem and destroy the kingdom. The Jewish king Ahaz feared that the Davidic dynasty might be coming to an end and that he would be the last of its kings (Isaiah 7. 1-12). Isaiah's prophecy, however, offered hope for the kingdom in these dark times.

The prophecy is sometimes seen as having an initial fulfilment in the son of Ahaz, King Hezekiah, who 'did what was right in the eyes of the Lord' (2 Kings 18. 3) and witnessed the dynasty's survival through crisis. But Hezekiah's reforms did not last, and the kingdom of Judah eventually was destroyed by another invading force, Babylon. Jews then would have seen how this prophecy was associated with God's larger plan to send a new anointed son of David to establish an everlasting dynasty that would reign over all the nations (Isaiah 9; Isaiah 11; 2 Samuel 7. 8-17).

But Matthew clearly views Jesus, the new royal son of David, born of the Virgin Mary, as the ultimate fulfilment of this prophecy from Isaiah. Jesus will be the one to restore the kingdom and bring Israel's history to its climax. God will be with him as he promised to be with the house of David. Hence he shall be called Emmanuel, 'God with us'.

We too can delight in this mystery of Emmanuel as God continues to be present to us today. He is present in the Scriptures, in prayer, in the sacraments and especially in the Eucharist. In fact, we can see Christ's desire to be with us until the end of time in his very last words to the apostles in Matthew's gospel:

'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Matthew 28. 19-20).

For Reflection

In these last days before Christmas, how can I draw near to the God who has sought to be close to us in prayer, the Scriptures and the sacraments?

Prayer

God, I thank you that you seek us out and desire to be close to us in your Word and in your sacraments. Amen.

Tuesday of Advent 4 - A Night to Remember

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, 'Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.' *Luke 2. 8-11*

Can you imagine what these shepherds experienced during the night watch in the countryside? An angel of the Lord appears in the darkness, and they find themselves encircled by 'the glory of the Lord'.

In the Old Testament, God's 'glory' was the visible manifestation of his divine presence. It often appeared in the form of a cloud, and it was associated with God's presence covering the ark of the covenant and filling the Holy of Holies of the temple (Exodus 40. 34; 1 Kings 8. 11; Ezekiel 10. 4, 18). No wonder the shepherds responded in fear! The splendid display illuminates the night, reminiscent of Zechariah's song, which foretold that the Messiah would 'give light to those who sit in darkness' (Luke 1. 79).

The birth of the Messiah escapes the notice of the powerful and the privileged in Israel, while lowly shepherds in their ordinary labour have front-row seats to the glory of God. Even more striking is the fact that these people do not have any relationship to Mary and Joseph; they are complete strangers.

This open, public proclamation of Christ's birth underscores the child's universal

mission. The baby Jesus will bring blessing not just to his parents; this child will be 'a great joy' for 'all the people'.

For Reflection

Where might I see God's glory - his presence - this Christmas?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for bringing your presence to our cold, dark world. Please let your presence shine through me this night. Amen.

Wednesday of Advent 4 - The Birth of the Messiah

And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger. *Luke 2. 7*

Today the true King of the World is born quietly in Bethlehem and placed in a manger, escaping the notice of most of the people whom he has come to save. From the creation of man and woman at the beginning of time, all the way up to the reign of the Roman Empire in the first century, the story of the human family reaches its climax in the coming of this child. The gospel accounts proclaim that God's plan for all of humanity was coming to fruition.

Interestingly, some early Christians saw in Christ's lowly beginnings a foreshadowing of his humiliating death. Just as Jesus at the start of his life was wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger (Luke 2. 7), so at the end of his life he would be wrapped in a linen cloth and laid in a tomb after being crucified on Calvary (Luke 23. 53). In fact, to express this connection, some Christian iconography later depicted Christ's birthplace as looking like a sepulchre.

The name of the city of his birth, Bethlehem, presents another foreshadowing of Christ's saving work. The word means 'house of bread'. In this place, 'the bread of life...comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die' (John 6. 48, 50). Just as the Son of God manifested himself to the world in Bethlehem, he presents himself to us today in the Bread of Life, the Eucharist.

For Reflection

When I receive the Eucharist today, am I aware that this is truly Jesus: Body, Blood, soul and divinity?

Prayer

Lord, your presence brought joy at Bethlehem. May I always rejoice in the gift of your Real Presence in the Eucharist every time I receive Holy Communion. Amen.