



4th Sunday of Advent



Date: Sunday, December 18, 2016 | **Season:** Advent | **Year:** A

First Reading: Isaiah 7:10–14

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 24:1–6 | **Response:** Psalm 24:7c, 10b

Second Reading: Romans 1:1–7

Gospel Acclamation: Matthew 1:23

Gospel Reading: Matthew 1:18–24

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Today I want to say something about dreams, and reflect on two people mentioned in today's readings: Ahaz and Joseph.

Behind the innocent sounding text of our first reading is a saga that sounds like it is out of the popular TV show, Game of Thrones – by which I mean there are lots of kingdoms with lots of names and characters with dodgy relationships and personal histories and lots of drama and it's often hard to keep track of what is going on. But the Church has included this in the readings for today, and being the week before Christmas to which all of Advent has been a preparation for, there is probably a good reason. I want to spend a little time trying to unpack this because I think most of us are more familiar with Joseph's story – but I will try to show you how they are related.

We are introduced to Ahaz, the King of Judah, in the reading from the Prophet Isaiah. We remember that Isaiah was prophesying and ministering between the years 739 and 686 B.C. As an aside, I think it is sometimes useful to remember that the coming of Christ, the messiah, had been foretold for hundreds of years before his incarnation. This goes someway to explaining Joseph's reaction in today's Gospel.

But let me get back to Ahaz. He was the son of Jotham and father of the future king Hezekiah. Isaiah was a prophet during the reign of all three of these kings. Ahaz became king at 20. He was young, and had disrespected God by worshipping on mountains instead of in the temple, and even sacrificing his own son.

Although we hear him quote the Scriptures today, saying “I will not put the Lord to the test”, he was rather better at quoting scripture, than trying to live its demands. During his reign there was a lot of instability. The Assyrian Empire – whose capital was Nineveh near today’s Mosul in Iraq – advanced to new heights, causing the entire region west of Mesopotamia to fight or pay tribute.

The kings of Syria and Israel joined forces to stop the advance of Assyria. When Judah would not join their alliance, those two kings sought ways to replace Ahaz with an Aramean man named Tabeel. Ahaz sought to rescue himself from this threat by appealing to Assyria’s King, even giving him portions of the temple treasury. So Ahaz was in a lot of trouble. On the one hand two kingdoms are conspiring to unseat him, and on the other he has sold out to an enemy, and used “Church” funds for the bribe. And at this troubled time the Lord is saying to Ahaz, ask me for a sign – I want to prove my faithfulness to you. Ahaz is wanting to sound pious, so he says “I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test”. Ahaz is trying to hide his true nature from God, and to resist God working through the prophet. He has already struck a deal with the Assyrians – but God is wanting to say that he should trust him. God responds saying he will give a sign “Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanu-el.” And so it happened. Within a few years, before this young prince reached the age of reason, the two kingdoms that Ahaz feared were laid low, and Judah enjoyed even greater prosperity than it had prior to the Assyrian threat. The word Immanu-el literally means God is with us. Ahaz learnt that God was faithful.

It is through the figure of Ahaz that we can learn that no matter what we have done, how we have turned away from God – God is not the one to abandon us. In Advent this is especially important as we prepare ourselves for the Lord’s coming – part of that preparation is a re-turning towards God...

But Ahaz reminds us of the ability we have to resist giving our lives over to God and the capacity we have for concealing our real motives from God, others, and even ourselves. Advent is a time for purifying our motives – even to ourselves.

Ahaz was an ancestor of Jesus and so God had plans for Ahaz and his family, just like he has plans for each one of us. God sent his prophet to comfort Ahaz and to be a messenger to him.

Let us look briefly at the Gospel, where God also sent a messenger to comfort Joseph. I'm sure everyone is very familiar with this text. The central character in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth is Joseph. Joseph doesn't appear very much in the Bible. From today's Gospel we learn that Mary and Joseph were betrothed. Marriages worked a little differently back then. Jews of Jesus' time understood marriage more in terms of a civil contract than as a religious ritual or "sacrament." Engagement or betrothal was taken very seriously and acknowledged to have legal consequences in Jewish culture.

When reading today's Gospel we are to envision that the betrothal ceremony between Joseph and Mary had already taken place and that they awaited the wedding ceremony. This meant that Mary was to remain at the home of her parents, and Joseph visits that household from time to time. Imagine his shock when he discovers that Mary is with child.

Now Joseph was an upright person, someone who wants to obey the Law of God as handed on from Moses. Under the Law, if a woman, who is betrothed or married, were to become pregnant with someone other than her husband, he would be entitled to Divorce her. We read in the Gospel that Joseph decided to divorce her quietly.

So this is what is going through his mind – not only to do the best by Mary and to not bring any shame onto her, but to also honour and keep the Law of God. But then he had a dream.

Many people in today's culture look at dreams as clues to their past and present, but in the ancient world, and certainly the world Jesus grew up in, people considered dreams as guides to the future.

God spoke to Joseph through his dreams. That is where the angel or messengers of God appear. What was the content of this first dream? It was the angel's announcement to Joseph regarding Jesus' birth, name, and identity. Jesus' identity was that he would save his people from their sins. Joseph would have been familiar with the promise of a messiah – but he must also have been scared that it would happen.

Joseph was faced with a decision, to either to put his trust in the law given by God to Moses, and so leave Mary, or to put his trust in something new God was about to do. Joseph chose the latter. Very often the church always talks about

how Mary's Yes was so important – but so was Joseph's yes – his yes, unlike Ahaz, to listen to God's messenger; his yes to accept that God is working in a new way; his yes to God fulfilling his promise – a promise foretold 700 years prior...

Joseph is a reminder for us today that whilst observing the law is important, one must always be on the lookout for what God is asking of us in our concrete situation, in our own lives.

We have seen two men – Ahaz who had turned away from God and whom God sends prophets to convince him to believe again and to trust his sign, and Joseph who is confused at what has happened to his betrothed, trusts in God's law and in his messenger, and is eventually persuaded and enlightened by God's messenger. In both cases, we should notice that it is God who is the one taking the initiative and asking them to trust him and to believe in his message.

This brings us to today. How often do we listen to God and allow God to speak to us? To ask us to trust him?

To do so will often mean we have to wrestle with the complexity of our own lives, to listen to the wisdom of tradition, to the law of the Lord handed down, and – like Joseph – to be open to any new initiative God might be attempting in us, and through us. We must always remember that God is faithful, God remains Emmanuel—"God with us." With us, and, I would say, with-in us.

We must ask ourselves whether we listen to our dreams? In Ignatian Spirituality we often say that God's deepest desires for us are our own deepest desires. That is, our hopes and dreams are God's hopes and dreams for us. We need to not be falsely pious like Ahaz, quoting scripture and not living it. We need to see that God has put desires and dreams inside us and that those are the desires and dreams he has for us.

As we prepare for Christmas – to welcome Christ back into our lives – let us pray that we might be able to say Yes, like Joseph, to the questions and challenges we will be asked to face as a result. For God's coming has unavoidable and glorious consequences for us all.

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Homilies from
Fr Matthew Charlesworth, S.J.

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