

Fourth Sunday of Advent A/2007

In difficult situations, most of people try what they can in order to change their misfortune, to have some a relief and, eventually to end up the course of the bad events. Such an attempt can go from a simple expectation of a providential man capable of changing the situation by his action to the possibility of making alliances with others in order to put an end to that situation. That is what happened to Israel as we heard in the first reading.

In fact, at that time, Israel was under the threat of neighboring enemies and run the risk of losing its freedom. Pushed by the events, the King Ahaz made a treaty with the Assyrians in order to save his head. The problem, however, is that, with regard to God's promise of being the unique protector of his people, such a treaty was like counting more on human power than on divine help.

That is why the prophet Isaiah intervened so that the king does not miss the opportunity to ask God a sign and to prove the accuracy of his promise. But since the king had already his plan, he hid himself behind a false piety by declaring that he will not tempt the Lord. Nevertheless, the prophet reassured him, because if Ahaz was afraid, it was God himself who would give him a sign. The king will have a powerful descendant, born from a virgin, who will be named Emmanuel, and who will put and end to any danger threatening his people.

The prospect of this promise goes beyond the mere story of Ahaz to the salvation of the whole world. That is why Matthew presents the birth of Jesus in his Gospel as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. In that perspective, Jesus is the descendant of the royal family, a son of the promise; he is both man and God. From the human point of view, he is linked to Joseph who is a descendant of David. But according to God's promises made to the prophets, he is a son who will not only change the life of Mary and Joseph, but also that of the whole world.

Three main traits show how Jesus is divine and comes from God. First of all, he is conceived through the action of the Holy Spirit and without human intervention. This makes that though Jesus is the son of Mary, he is fully divine. The fact that Mary has conceived without a human intervention shows that for God nothing is impossible. As God acted in the past by making the impossible possible, so can he do it again today for those who trust him.

Second, the angel asks Joseph to accept God's mystery manifested in the pregnancy of Mary, to keep his wife with him, and to give a name to the child once he is born. As it clearly appears, if Mary has received the mission of bringing Jesus to the world, it is, however, to Joseph that is assigned the mission of giving the name to Jesus in order to insert him in his descendants as the fulfillment of the prophecies. Here we see how Mary and Joseph complete each other as true parents of Jesus, even if in the life of the Church and in the popular devotion the place of Joseph does not appear so clearly.

Third, the name Joseph gives to the Infant shows also the mission this extraordinary child has to fulfill: "Emmanuel, which means "God is with us". In other words, Jesus is the child who brings God close to the world. In him, the

Father is present and fulfills his plan of salvation for mankind. Through Jesus Christ, God has chosen to dwell in our humanity and to become one of us, a human being. This makes the grandeur of Christianity, namely that we are not worshipping a remote God, or a God who can be found in a stone or the wind or nature, but a personal God who wants to save us.

Furthermore, the name of Emmanuel does not mean only that God is close to us than he never has been before, but also that he is at our side anywhere and everywhere, in our hopes and our struggles, in our joys and our sorrows, sharing with us each moment of our life and our destiny.

It is that mystery of Jesus Saint Paul is talking about in the second reading. For St Paul, Jesus is a descendant of David according to the flesh, but the Son of God by the power of Holy Spirit. That mystery of Jesus was already announced by the prophet, and his mission today, as apostle as well as to each one of us, is to make it known to the nations.

Why are we told the story of Jesus as we approach the feast of Christmas? The reason is, on the one hand, that by accepting it we too come to the obedience of faith, that is, the recognition in our hearts that in Jesus God has become one of us in order to save to us and, on the other hand, by accepting the word of Jesus, we might be sanctified by the grace of his Holy Spirit.

Now I would like to finish by bringing out some points we can learn from today's readings. First, we saw in the first reading that the king Ahaz, in spite of the assurance of Isaiah could not dare ask a sign to God. By acting so, he surely wanted to resolve his problem alone, without recourse to God. If it is true that we have to take the responsibility for our problems, is it, however, true that we can resolve all our problems without God? Ahaz is the symbol of modern man who thinks that, because he lives in the culture that wants to control everything, he can live without God. There are things we can do in our own; there are some others for which we need God's help. To count on God does not diminish at all our responsibility. As Isaiah says, "Lord, You mete out peace to us, for it is you who have accomplished all that we have done" (Is 26, 12).

The second point I would like to bring is about Joseph. We saw in the Gospel that Joseph had a plan of marriage with Mary. But suddenly that plan was disturbed by God's plan on Mary. As a just man, Joseph accepted in faith what God asked him to do. My point is this: as Christmas season comes up, you will certainly meet people you do not like at all, how ready are you to accept to be disturbed by these people? Would you like Christmas to be a joy only for you alone or would like also to share that joy with others? May the example of Mary and Joseph help you welcome God's grace by welcoming each other!

Isaiah 7, 10-14; Romans 1, 1-7; Matthew 1, 18-24



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