

Fourth Sunday of Advent A/2019

The readings of this last Sunday of Advent anticipate the celebration of the birth of Jesus. They lead us to the discovery of the human history of Jesus as foretold by the prophets and fulfilled in the life of Mary and Joseph. They invite us to recognize Jesus as the son of man and the Son of God, the savior of the world.

The first reading describes what happened at the time when Ahaz was the King of Israel. It shows that, as Isaiah pressured the king to ask for a sign from God for the protection of the land, he preferred not to do so for fear of tempting him. It shows equally that, because the king did not want to do so, God took the matter into his hands by providing a sign through the conception of a virgin who was about to give birth to a child-king whose name was Emmanuel.

What is behind this text is the idea that God steps in and helps human beings when they are overwhelmed with difficulties and hardships. Another idea is the truth that human beings cannot resolve alone all the problems they have without God's help. The last idea is related to the truth that the historical context helps us understand the stakes of the prophecies by shedding light on the short and the long term of salvation history.

This text allows us to understand the point of today's Gospel as it describes the story of the birth of Jesus. The Gospel starts with the story of the engagement between Joseph and Mary, the mother of Jesus. It says that before they lived together, Mary was found pregnant. Then, it shows that Joseph, seeing how the situation was unbearable and unacceptable, resolved to divorce her. It also shows that instructed by the angel, Joseph took his wife into his home. The Gospel ends with the giving of the name of Emmanuel to the baby, according to the recommendations of the angel.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about Jesus' identity. In fact, each one of us has a history and a background. To know the history of a person and his background is to understand that person, to discover his identity, to shed light on his life and to grasp what makes him unique. Moreover, if we ignore the main events that have crossed the life of someone, which have contributed to his convictions and principles of life, we will never grasp him correctly.

The personal history, however, would be incomprehensible and even incomplete if it was cut from the broad context of the history of our own parents who have given us life. Our personal history, indeed, is rooted in the history of our parents who have given us birth. In that sense, the history of our parents sheds light on the uniqueness of our own personality and explains to a large extent who we are today.

This simple, but true, reality that we can tell for each one of us can be confirmed as well for the account of the life of Jesus. Let us see how all that unfolds. In fact, the Gospel says that before the parents of Jesus lived together, Mary was found pregnant with a child through the Holy Spirit.

The mention of this incident instructs us enough on the identity of Jesus. In fact, Jesus is a particular person; he is not a son like any other, but unique. He was not conceived by the will of a man, but rather that of God. In that sense, Jesus is the son of man by his tie to Joseph, but he is also the Son of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

If that is true, then, in this person, Jesus Christ, God is present in a unique way. When Jesus speaks, it is God who speaks to the world in communicating his will and his deepest desires. It means also that those who welcome Jesus do not welcome just a man, but welcome God who is acting through him. This is a big mystery we call incarnation, which we will be celebrating in the feast of Christmas, namely that God took human flesh and dwelt among us.

This is already obvious in the name that the angel proposed to be given to the baby. He will be called Jesus, he said, because he will save his people from their sins. In that sense, Jesus is destined for the salvation of the world, because through him our sins will be forgiven and peace between God and us, and between one another restored.

Furthermore, the name “Emmanuel” that will be given to him instructs us enough on his identity. It means that in Jesus Christ, God is with us. In him, God is closer to us more than ever before. He is at our side anywhere and everywhere, in our hopes and our struggles, in our joys and our sorrows, sharing with us the ups and downs of our life.

The Gospel says also that when Joseph realized what was going on with Mary, he resolved to divorce her, but withdrew his intent when advised by the angel about the whole affair. In his faithfulness to God and the boldness of his faith, he simply obeyed the angel and kept his wife with him.

This trait of the life of Joseph and Mary will be translated in the life of Jesus as well. First of all, it is true that where God comes in, people are in trouble in the sense that he brings his vision of things and his way of living that is not always the way humans consider things. But, it is also true that where human beings are in trouble, when God steps in, the tragedy becomes triumph.

This is true for Mary in what happened to her. In fact, the conditions of a normal marriage were not fulfilled and yet she found herself expecting a baby. The Law of Moses recommended that in such a case, the woman has to be stoned and yet God preserved her, because Joseph acted as though she was really the real husband and the Father of her son. This element of obedience to God will shape the life of Jesus, too. He will be obedient until death on the cross. But, because of his obedience, God will let him triumph in raising him from the dead.

Now let me finish by referring to Joseph. The Gospel says that he had a plan of marriage with Mary, but it had been disturbed as he found her pregnant. However, as a just man, he accepted in faith what God asked him to do. Now, here is my question: as Christmas comes close, many people will come to our homes for the festivities, some of whom we really dislike. Like Joseph, will we accept to be disturbed in our plan by these people? Will we accept to quiet our animosity and allow the family to meet in peace for this Christmas? God bless you all!

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



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