

Sermon for 23rd December 2018 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)
Is. 11. 1-9; Ps. 123; Matt. 1. 18-25.

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” “Emmanuel.....God with us.” Two phrases from our gospel reading, each with a name that is then interpreted for us. It is interesting to note that, whereas Luke tells the story of Christ's birth with Mary his mother as the one who sees an angel, Matthew has Joseph as the main character, who has not one but four visions of an angel. From the more frequently recounted stories from Luke's gospel and from many of our familiar carols, we are perhaps more accustomed to the idea of Mary being the centre of attention, with shepherds leaving their flocks on the hillside. So I thought it might be helpful to imagine how Joseph might have described events to Jesus when he was about twelve, shortly after they'd all returned home from their visit to Jerusalem for the Passover.

So imagine the scene, perhaps in Joseph's workshop during a tea-break, when Joseph has Jesus all to himself. “Jesus, my boy. You've been a good son to us both all these years, helping your Mum to bring up your younger brothers and sisters, and now starting to assist me in my business. What with trying to earn enough to feed a large family and having to go off to some of the bigger towns around for work, I'd forgotten all about the strange circumstances surrounding your birth, until last week, when you gave us both such a shock by staying behind in Jerusalem instead of joining our party returning home to Galilee. Your Mum and I ran all the way back to Jerusalem when we discovered you were not with us, and searched for three days until we found you, in the temple. It was what you said then – 'didn't you know I must be about my Father's interests' – that reminded me that, although I've always treated you as my son, I'm not your natural father. I'm sure now that you know this; but let me tell you how I experienced your birth.”

“As you know, in our country it is customary for marriages to be arranged between families, without necessarily any regard to the feelings of the youngsters involved. Happily in our case our fathers did what we wanted, for Mary and I were very fond of each other. Well, in the usual way, a marriage contract was drawn up, when your mother was only a year or so older than you are now. Under our laws, that meant that, although she stayed living with her parents, she was already my property, even though we wouldn't sleep together until after the wedding ceremony the following year. All went well until one evening, about a week before the day, I met her as usual after work and found her trembling and troubled. I asked 'what's the matter?' and she replied 'I've some wonderful but strange news. I'm going to have a baby; but it's OK, 'cos he's from God.' Well, I'd never heard such a tale! From God? Pull the other one! I exploded with fury, called her all sorts of names, and stormed out of the house and out of the village, because I couldn't think of going home to tell my father about the disgrace. I walked up and down until I'd calmed sufficiently to think what I'd do about it.”

“First I thought there was only one thing to do and that was to take Mary to the village elders and get her to tell them exactly what had happened and who the brute was who'd done this. Then I remembered that there were a couple of strict, ultra-conservative men on the council who, even if the girl was not to blame, were still likely to insist she be stoned to death for her part in leading the man astray, or at the very least be given 200 lashes. And I couldn't bear the thought of that happening to Mary, for I loved her dearly and was sure she would not have been unfaithful to me. So I then thought it best to keep things quiet and to get two witnesses to sign another contract, this time to make our wedding contract null and void. This would mean that Mary would stay with her family and they'd have to manage it, by getting the baby aborted, perhaps, or sending Mary away to have her child somewhere else. Anyway, I'd have washed my hands of it all. Of course, I had no thoughts about you or your welfare – why should I?”

“Well, having resolved what to do, I still felt uncomfortable about going back home, so I lay down and fell asleep in the open. And then I had this dream – vision, really. I saw an angel and he was talking to me and saying: 'Don't worry, Joseph. It really is all right, as Mary said. The baby she is to have is from God, and you are to call him Jesus' (which means Saviour), 'because he will save his people from their sins. So go ahead with your wedding.' You could have knocked me down with a feather! Anyway, that set my mind at rest, especially when I suddenly called to mind that bit out of Isaiah that goes: 'Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel, that is God with us.' Isaiah also

wrote that 'a shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse', and of course we trace our ancestry back to Jesse and David. So, as soon as the sun woke me up, I rushed back to Mary's house, and found her all red-eyed and weepy, as you might expect. I hugged her and told her how sorry I was for my behaviour the previous evening, how I'd had this vision, and we would get married and we'd call the baby Jesus – which she then said was what an angel had told her should be his name.”

“There's a lot more I could tell you: how we came to be in Bethlehem the night you were born, in a stable; how we were visited first by shepherds, then by three strange men from the east, astrologers who said they'd been following a new star. And then about my second vision, not a nice one, the angel telling me to flee at once out of Judaea; our flight in the middle of the night, and how we heard that next day Herod's henchmen had marched into Bethlehem and killed all babies under two. How a year or two later I had two more visions, first to tell me it was OK to return from Egypt to Israel and then to warn me not to go back to Bethlehem but to return here to Nazareth. But when and how you're going to save our nation from these awful Romans I cannot begin to guess.”

The season of Advent not only prepares us to celebrate the birth of Jesus, our Saviour, Emmanuel, God with us; it also seeks to prepare us for his coming again in power and great glory, by warning us to wait patiently, to watch and to pray earnestly for our Lord to fulfil his promise, and to prepare ourselves so that we are not caught unawares when he comes. As the prophet Habakkuk put it (at about the turn of the 7th to 6th centuries BC), when he was complaining to God about the plight of the people of Judah at that time: “I will stand at my watch-post.....I will keep watch to see what he will say to me..... Then the Lord answered me and said: 'Write the vision; make it plain on tablets.....For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay'.”

On the first Sunday of Advent we sang here at St. Peter's the matin responsory: “I look from afar; and lo, I see the power of God coming, and a cloud covering the whole earth. Go ye out to meet him and say: Tell us, art thou he that should come to reign over thy people Israel?” The Advent Antiphon that is set in the liturgy for today, 23rd December, gives us the answer: “O Emmanuel, our King and our lawgiver; the Desire of all nations and their Salvation: Come and save us, O Lord our God.” But, although we have the means of salvation, our redemption is not yet complete and won't be until Jesus returns, as he has promised he will.

And so the message I leave today, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, repeats those words from Matthew's gospel and from the Antiphon: “Jesus, Saviour; Emmanuel, God with us: Come and save us, O Lord our God.”

To the God who showed His love for us by sending His only Son to be born as man, to die for us and rise again that we might live, be all honour, glory, might and power, thanksgiving and praise, this Christmastide and for evermore. Amen.