

## Sermon St. James, Advent 4, 22 December 2013

**Isaiah 7.10-16**

**Ps. 80.1-7, 16-18**

**Romans 1.1-7**

**Matthew 1.18-25**

*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.*

*Look the young woman is with child and will bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel (God with us). Is.7.14*

We are getting very close to Christmas and many of us here are very busy with our preparations – at home or even at Church

Amidst all these preparations and the anticipation we are aware that the world is as complicated, conflict-ridden and full of suffering as it was two thousand years ago when Christ was born. The pictures of refugee camps and desolate cities in Syria are on our minds; the conflicts in the Central African Republic and the Sudan; the devastation in the Philippines – as well as the personal tragedies and accidents that have left us, or loved ones bereft and hurting, struggling to cope with life, often wondering where God is.

It seems that little has changed since the time of this morning's bible readings.

The passage from Isaiah – with the words of the young woman bearing a son - comes from a time in the kingdom of Judah, when King Ahaz and his people were beleaguered by hostile neighbours on all sides – it's the end of the 8thC B.C.. The king has to make a decision how to deal with the threats of invasion on his door step. He was caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand he was under pressure to join an alliance between the northern kingdom, Israel and Syria, against the mighty King of Assyria. On the other hand Assyria is threatening to invade Judah. Judah, a small kingdom stands little chance of coming out unharmed.

In this situation Isaiah is asking King Ahaz to trust God. Through Isaiah, *'The Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying 'Ask a sign of the Lord your God' (vs 11). But Ahaz said 'I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test'. (vs12).*

While Ahaz' response sounds like a noble and righteous response –after all, the commandments tell us we must not put the Lord to the test – here Ahaz is actually disobeying God. He has made up his mind what to do in relation to his political predicament, and he is not going to listen to the prophet. Ahaz has forgotten God's history with his people -he is not going to put his trust in God; he is going to rely on his own judgement and will pursue his course. It is then that Isaiah announces: *'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel'. (which means 'God with us')*. – Certainly not the sort of sign Ahaz would have expected!

This prophecy found fulfilment in Isaiah's own time – the young woman with child was his wife, who bore a Son and they named him Immanuel. By the time the child was weaned, i.e. eating curds and honey, Israel and Syria had been overrun by Assyria, and Judah was invaded and forced to become a Assyrian vassal. King Ahaz and his successor did not listen to the prophet; did not trust in God, and eventually Jerusalem was badly destroyed and its inhabitants taken into exile.

The sign from God was a young child with the name Immanuel... did anyone pay attention other than Isaiah?

About 730 years later Joseph, a devout and righteous Jew finds himself in a terrible predicament, where his lovely fiancé is pregnant – and he knows he is not the father. He must have been very upset, hurt, confused – how his beloved Mary could end up in this situation. And she was saying the child was from God, conceived by the Holy Spirit. How likely was that? No, he would have to end the marriage contract, effectively divorce Mary- he would do it quietly, but for Mary this meant she would be an outcast, living in poverty, disgraced. But what choice did he have. Having made his decision, he had a dream, in which the angel tells him not to be afraid, but to believe Mary's story. And to remember the scripture from Isaiah *' look the young woman/ virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us'.*' Mt.1.23

In contrast to Ahaz, Joseph is prepared to trust... he is prepared to believe this crazy thing, that God may come in a child, carried by his fiancé Mary – and that this child is ‘God with us’, and he, Joseph is going to receive this child and be the one who makes sure the baby and Mary are safe and are taken care off.

This morning’s readings invite us to notice how surprising this sign was at the time – God coming to live among us as a baby!

It surprised King Ahaz; it surprised an unmarried man named Joseph. A sign easily missed. Thousands of babies are born every day. Very few took note in Isaiah’s day, not many were aware of the birth of Jesus when we come to think of it! and yet! This sign makes sense to us – otherwise we wouldn’t be here- but can we comprehend it’s meaning? – God coming among us as a vulnerable child who shares our vulnerability, who offers love and invites love– this God is not going to hurt us. This God assures us not to be afraid even when life is difficult. This God is with us.

In a few days’ time we will contemplate and celebrate the birth of this child, the Word made flesh, coming to dwell among us – and its meaning

Today, the invitation is - amongst our preparations and busy-ness- to pray for an openness to God’s coming among us as a child; the ability to notice and be surprised; the willingness to receive God’s gifts to us; that we may grow in faith, hope and trust that God is with us – no matter what our circumstances. Amen.