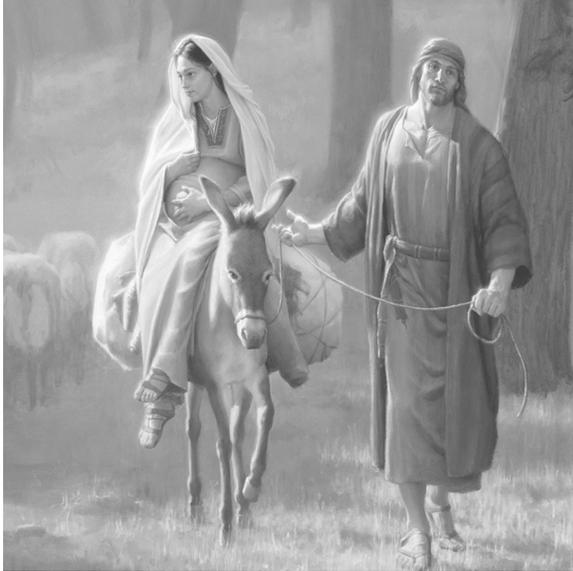




Parish of the Holy Eucharist

Small Group Faith Sharing Material
4th Sunday of Advent—December 22, 2013
Sunday Readings



Opening Prayer

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord,
your grace into our hearts,
that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ you Son
was made known by the message of an Angel,
may by his Passion and Cross
be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.
Who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit
one God, for ever and ever.

(source: The Roman Missal, Third Typical Edition)



Mass Readings

Reading 1

Is 7:10-14

The LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying: Ask for a sign from the LORD, your God; let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky! But Ahaz answered, "I will not ask! I will not tempt the LORD!" Then Isaiah said: Listen, O house of David! Is it not enough for you to weary people, must you also weary my God? Therefore the Lord himself

will give you this sign: the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.

The Word of the Lord

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 24:1-6

R. Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

The LORD's are the earth and its fullness;
the world and those who dwell in it.

For he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.

R. Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

Who can ascend the mountain of the LORD?
or who may stand in his holy place?

One whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean,
who desires not what is vain.

R. Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

He shall receive a blessing from the LORD,
a reward from God his savior.

Such is the race that seeks for him,
that seeks the face of the God of Jacob.

R. Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

Reading 2

Rom 1:1-7

Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised previously through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh, but established as Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Through him we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about the obedience of faith, for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles, among whom are you also, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ; to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Word of the Lord

Gospel

Mt 1:18-24

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

*Behold, the virgin shall conceive
and bear a son, and
they shall name him Emmanuel,*

which means "God is with us." When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.

The Gospel of the Lord



Commentary

Matthew

Matthew traces the ancestry of Jesus through Joseph, who was "thought to be the father of Jesus." Joseph had claimed legal fatherhood over the child when invited to do so by the messenger of God. The story of the birth of Jesus is told from the experience of Joseph, the legal father, and not from the experience of Mary, the birth mother. All this is not surprising since Matthew is writing for a community which values the Jewish traditions and spontaneously thinks in Jewish thought forms. The Jewish-Christian community to whom Matthew addresses his "book" would have found all this very compatible and familiar.

Luke, who will write a "narrative" for a community largely made up of Gentile-Christians, will not use this approach at all. Mark, who writes neither a "book" nor a "narrative" but a "Gospel," does not even have any birth account or an infancy story

The text does explicitly teach that Jesus was conceived in the womb of a virgin. There is no mention of

perpetual virginity, as is the faith of the Church; but such a doctrine is not excluded by this wording. Although there had been stories of miraculous births in Hebrew history (Isaac: Genesis 18:11-14; Jacob: Genesis 25:21; Samuel: 1 Samuel 1:4-20), never before had there been the absence of the male role as we find here. In the case of Jesus, the male principle is replaced by the direct act of the Holy Spirit. God will be the father of Jesus Christ; there is no other earthly father, except in the juridical sense (See above). The term *Holy Spirit* does not occur often in the Hebrew Bible. But the *Spirit of God* is always a *creative spirit*. It is creative of human life (Ezekiel 27:1-14; Job 27:3; Isaiah 42:5), and the active agent of creation for the whole universe (Genesis 1:2). But here, the Spirit of God intervenes directly so that this child will be *Son of God*.

Joseph was a *just* man. Joseph is portrayed as *obedient* to God. But his obedience turns on the issue of compassion and love, not on the strict application of what is permitted by the law. He will not see the beloved girl stoned to death for having committed adultery. He will show compassion and protect her and her child from this fate. In this, he becomes even more a true image of the compassionate God who is the Father of Jesus Christ. Already, the works of the Kingdom of God are being exercised; to go beyond the literal demands of the Law of Moses and to show compassion already announces the beginning of a new covenant arrangement.

Joseph will name the child. In Luke's Gospel, "they," Mary and Joseph, will give him the name (Luke 2:21), the name which had been entrusted to Mary (Luke 1:31).

His name will be Jesus. He was named by God. God gave him his identity and his mission. He is of divine origin; it is normal that his identity and mission should also come from God. *Joshua* in Greek is rendered Jesus; *Yeshuah* in Hebrew. Surely, *Yahweh* saves already in the proclamation that the kingdom has taken root in our midst. More literally, the name means "Yahweh, help!" A perfect cry from our hearts for Advent!

Isaiah

Matthew will use this word from Isaiah as a word of promise and comfort for the Church of the day and for us today: "A young woman will give birth; her child will bring many blessings." We know the Child to be Christ; the woman to be the Virgin Mary. Isaiah had offered this sign to Ahaz, king of Judah, if only he trusted in the Lord. The kingdom of Judah was being pressured by the king of Ephraim (Israel) and the king of Syria to enter with them into an alliance against the king of Assyria. The prophet

suggests that Ahaz not do that, but that he trust only in the Lord. It was too much for Ahaz.



Romans

Paul introduces himself to the Christians at Rome; he validates his right to be called an apostle of Jesus Christ. His message is the same "Good News" which they have already received. He explains how the Jewish Scriptures have been fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The *grace and peace* of the greeting flow, not from Paul himself but from God as it did in the days of Aaron (Numbers 6:24-26).



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever experienced the presence and the power of God in your life? How did you know that it was God? Did you find it difficult to communicate this fact to others in a convincing way? Or did you just keep it to yourself? Didn't you feel the need to tell? What are some of the signs that God may be present in any given situation? Remember the old Latin hymn: "*Ubi caritas et amor, ibi Deus est.*" ("Where this love and charity there God is to be found.")

2. What evidence have you seen this year that God is still coming to the world with love and compassion in the very midst of wars and destruction and alienation? How have you been able to bring the saving presence of Christ to those around you during this season? Have you been successful in suggesting hope to a person who might otherwise have given up and settled for less; less life; less humanness?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Choose one way in which you and your group or family might be the embodiment of the *caritas et amor* (charity and love) for one other person during this season. God will be present to that person through your ministry, through your love and caring, even if that person does not recognize it.

Watch the Video

Please watch the reflection on the weekly readings prepared by the staff at Parish of the Holy Eucharist. It can be found on the parish website at www.pothe.org or you may obtain copies of the DVD at the parish office. See www.POTHE.org to watch the video or use the DVD provided by the parish.

Prayers of Intercession

Conclude with the "Our Father"



CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

The Catechism of the Catholic Church #156-159

What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason: we believe "because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived". So "that the submission of our faith might nevertheless be in accordance with reason, God willed that external proofs of his Revelation should be joined to the internal helps of the Holy Spirit." Thus the miracles of Christ and the saints, prophecies, the Church's growth and holiness, and her fruitfulness and stability "are the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all"; they are "motives of credibility" (motiva credibilitatis), which show that the assent of faith is "by no means a blind impulse of the mind".

Faith is certain. It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot

lie. To be sure, revealed truths can seem obscure to human reason and experience, but "the certainty that the divine light gives is greater than that which the light of natural reason gives." "Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt."

"Faith seeks understanding": it is intrinsic to faith that a believer desires to know better the One in whom he has put his faith, and to understand better what He has revealed; a more penetrating knowledge will in turn call forth a greater faith, increasingly set afire by love. The grace of faith opens "the eyes of your hearts" to a lively understanding of the contents of Revelation: that is, of the totality of God's plan and the mysteries of faith, of their connection with each other and with Christ, the center of the revealed mystery. "The same Holy Spirit constantly perfects faith by his gifts, so that Revelation may be more and more profoundly understood." In the words of St. Augustine, "I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe."

Faith and science: "Though faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason. Since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind, God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth." "Consequently, methodical research in all branches of knowledge, provided it is carried out in a truly scientific manner and does not override moral laws, can never conflict with the faith, because the things of the world and the things of faith derive from the same God. The humble and persevering investigator of the secrets of nature is being led, as it were, by the hand of God in spite of himself, for it is God, the conservator of all things, who made them what they are."

With our annual observance of Advent and Christmas, we find ourselves immersed once again in the Christian experiences of faith which have so marked human history and so affected our personal lives and that of the world. We ourselves are not at all what we would have been without the coming of Christ. In faith, we know and are committed to the realization that God has intervened in the world with saving power and with blessings unforeseen, blessings that we would not have dared hope for before they were given. Faith helps us see the whole universe with the very insight of God; by faith we cling to the commitment we have made to Jesus Christ in whose birth, life and ministry, death and resurrection, we have access to eternal salvation.

Religious faith comes from God as a gift. Jesus tells Peter that the insight by which he could proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God had come to him not from human sources but from the Heavenly Father (Matthew 16:17). The evidence for believing religiously does not rest on human persuasion but on the very authority of God. Surely, what we believe is not contrary to human reason. In fact, the elements of our faith statements are supremely in harmony with human reason. But they are not derived from the logic of human reasoning as are mathematical conclusions or scientific knowledge. We believe because God stands by what we believe. We believe because God's authority stands behind what we adhere to. Religious faith is also a human act that flows from the free choices that we make as human beings. Although motivated by the grace that comes to us from God, acts of faith are truly human acts, originating in our willingness to believe and to trust. The human will puts out the commitment to believe and to trust. God does not force our acts of faith. They are freely chosen by us.

I have a choice: whether or not I want to attribute to God the good things I see around me. If I choose to interpret the reality of my life with its events and its occurrences as being related to God, then I hold to a religious or faith-based interpretation of that reality. If I choose a merely secular interpretation of that same reality, then I hold to a secular view of that reality. In a certain sense, a secular interpretation is itself a kind of "faith" in the sense that it is a freely chosen interpretation of reality. In this case, it is a "non-God" kind of stance; but is, nonetheless, an interpretation.

Credits

Opening Prayer. *Missale Romanum, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008. Roman Missal, Catholic Book Publishing Co., New York, 2011.*

Readings for Mass. Excerpts from the Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America, second typical edition © 2001, 1998, 1997, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC.

Commentary and Catholic Doctrine. *Echoing God's Word.* © 2013 Rev. Clement D. Thibodeau, 12 St. Anne Ave., Caribou, ME 04736 All rights reserved.

Catechism of the Catholic Church