

The Bells of St. Mary's
The Church of the Immaculate Conception

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 22, 2019

From Fr. Anthony Columba Ekanem, MSP—Pastor

King Ahaz and Joseph's Response

Behind this innocent-sounding response from King Ahaz in the first reading, "I will not ask! I will not tempt the Lord!" (Is. 7:13), the Church purposely includes this reading with Joseph's response in the Gospel for our reflection today. This is something for us to ponder upon; how we cooperate in / with God's plan primarily as we draw closer to the final days before Christmas.

Today is the last Sunday of our preparation for Christmas. In a couple of days, we celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Christ. The remaining days calls for more caution and vigilance as human instruments in God's work of salvation.

First of all, Isaiah's prophesy is set on the context of the powerful and brutal Assyrian empire around the 8th century. He was ministering between the years 739 and 686 B.C. prophesying the coming of Christ, the messiah in a critical time of Judah hundreds of years before His incarnation. This context goes to explain in a way the connection of the Messianic dimension in today's Gospel. "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 a child through the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 1:18)

A 20-year-old son of Jotham, Ahaz was the ruler of the Kingdom of Judah. He refused to join any coalition; some neighboring nations marched against him. In the face of Ahaz's wavering, Isaiah assured him that the alliance would not prevail, that he should stop being afraid, and should put his faith in the Lord. He did not respect nor trust in the true God. Instead, he worshipped on mountains instead of in the temple, and even sacrificed his son. Although we hear him quote the Scriptures today, saying, "I will not put the Lord to the test," he was somehow better at quoting scripture, than trying to live its demands. During his reign, there was a lot of instability.

The kings of Syria and Israel joined forces to stop the advance of Assyria. When Judah would not join their alliance, those two kings sought ways to replace Ahaz with an Aramean man named Tabeel. Ahaz tried to rescue himself from this threat by appealing to Assyria's King, even giving him portions of the temple treasury. So Ahaz was in a lot of trouble. On the one hand, two kingdoms are conspiring to unseat him, and on the other, he has sold out to an enemy and used "Church" funds for the bribe. And at this troubled time, the Lord is saying to Ahaz, ask me for a sign – I want to prove my faithfulness to you. Ahaz wants to sound pious, though, his hypocritical words, "I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test," should not be misunderstood. Ahaz is trying to hide his true nature from God and to resist God working through the prophet. He has already struck a deal with the Assyrians – but God wants to say that he should trust Him. God responds, saying He will give a sign, "Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." And so it happened. Within a few years, before this young prince reached the age of reason, the two kingdoms that Ahaz feared were laid low, and Judah enjoyed even greater prosperity than it had before the Assyrian threat. The word 'Immanuel' literally means 'God is with us.' Ahaz learned that God was faithful.

It is through the figure of Ahaz that we can learn that no matter what we have done, how we have turned away from God – God is not the one to abandon us. Remember, "The scepter shall never depart from Judah, or the mace from between his legs, while tribute is brought to him, and he receives the people's homage." (Genesis 49:9).

In Advent Season, this is especially important as we prepare ourselves for the Lord's coming – part of that preparation is a re-turning towards God. But Ahaz reminds us of the ability we have to resist giving our lives over to God and the capacity we have for concealing our real motives from God, others, and even ourselves. Advent is a time for purifying our motives – even to ourselves. Ahaz was an ancestor of Jesus, and so God had plans for Ahaz and his family, just like he has plans for each one of us. God sent his prophet to comfort Ahaz and to be a messenger to him.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the central character in the account of Jesus' birth is Joseph. We learned about Mary and Joseph betrothal. Marriages worked a little differently back then. Jews of Jesus' time understood marriage more in terms of a civil contract than as a religious ritual or "sacrament." Engagement or betrothal was taken very seriously and acknowledged to have legal consequences in Jewish culture. That means Mary is to remain at the home of her parents. Joseph visits that household from time to time. Imagine his shock when he discovers that Mary is with a child.

Joseph was an upright person, someone who wants to obey the Law of God as handed on from Moses. According to the law, a woman betrothed or married were to become pregnant with someone other than her husband, he would be entitled to divorce her. We read in the Gospel that Joseph decided to divorce her quietly. Just imagine the moral dilemma that Joseph was going through - not only to do the best by Mary and to not bring any shame onto her but also honor and keep the Law of God. But then, he had a dream about how to handle the situation.

That is where the messenger of God appears. It was the angel's announcement to Joseph regarding Jesus' birth, name, and identity. Jesus' identity was that he would save his people from their sins. Joseph would have been familiar with the promise of a messiah – but he must also have been scared that it would happen. Joseph faced with indecision; either to put his trust in the law given by God to Moses, and so leave Mary or to put his trust in something new God was about to do. Joseph chose the latter. Joseph's 'Yes' to the angel's message was different from that of King Ahaz. Joseph is a reminder for us today that while observing the law is essential, one must always be on the lookout for what God is asking of us in our concrete situation in our own lives. In both cases, we should notice that it is God who is the one taking the initiative and asking them to trust Him and to believe in His message.

To do this often means we have to wrestle with the complexity of our own lives,

- To listen to the wisdom of tradition,
- To the law of the Lord handed down, and – like Joseph
- To be open to any new initiative

We must always remember that God is always faithful; God remains Emmanuel -"God with us." We must ask ourselves whether we listen to our dreams? In Ignatius Spirituality, we often say that God's deepest desires for us are our own deepest desires. That is, our hopes and dreams are God's hopes and dreams for us. We need not be falsely pious like Ahaz, quoting scripture, and not living it. We need to see that God has put desires and dreams inside us and that those are the desires and hopes he has for us.

As we prepare for Christmas in a couple of days – to welcome Christ back into our lives – let us pray that we might be able to say 'Yes,' like Joseph, to the questions and challenges we face as a result, just like Mary will do in a couple of days.

Stewardship

*Tithing - God's Plan for Giving on Sunday, 12/15/19 our Offering was \$ 3, 003.00

Don't forget to make your Appointment for your Parish Family Photo Please see Dianne at the back of the Church to make your appointment for your parish family photo. The photographer will be here on January 4 & 5.

Food Collection: Next week we will have our monthly food collection for the needy in our community and as always thank you for your generosity in helping those less fortunate than ourselves.

~ **Altar Server Appreciation Day** ~

Will take place on Saturday December 28, 2019 in the Hall. From 11:00 am to 2:00 pm

Sundays Readings:

First Reading: Isaiah 7: 10-14 p. 30

The Lord offered Ahaz a sign. Ahaz answered, "I will not ask! I will not tempt the Lord!" Nevertheless, the Lord gave a sign: "The virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel."

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 24:1-2, 3-4, 5-6 p. 30 Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.

Second Reading: Romans 1: 1-7 p. 31 Paul told the Romans he was called to be an apostle and set apart to proclaim the gospel of God about Christ Jesus. He said to them, "We have received the grace of apostleship" that we may spread the name and bring to faith all those called to belong to Jesus Christ.

Gospel: Matthew 1: 18-24 p. 31

Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they wed, Mary became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph decided to break the engagement. He changed his mind when an angel in a dream told him to receive Mary as his wife.

Religious Education

Decembe 12/25/19 - Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all our families in our religious education program .
12/29- 1/4/20 - No Religious Education
Classes We need our students to help in various ministry during the holidays.

Cardinal's Annual Stewardship Appeal

As the Archdiocese is rounding up the annual appeal in a couple of weeks, I want to sincerely thank you, sisters and brothers, who have always contributed generously to this annual appeal. We are blessed to have people like you in our parish community. Our Parish Community which is made up of Arabic, Spanish, and English speaking parishioners, has never lacked behind in these annual efforts. Let us endeavor to include this desire in our Christmas Wish List to reach our Parish goal. Thank you, and may our good Lord continue to bless you.

CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR MASS SCHEDULE

Christmas Eve: Tuesday, Dec. 24

8:15 AM – English Mass 12:05 PM – English Mass 5:00 PM – English Mass 7:00 PM – Arabic Mass

12:00 MIDNIGHT – Bi – Lingual Mass

Christmas Day: Wednesday, Dec. 25

9:00 AM – SPANISH MASS

11:00 AM – ENGLISH MASS

NO ARABIC MASS

Feast of the Holy Family: Sunday, Dec. 29 – Regular Masses

New Year's Eve: Tues., Dec. 31 (day of obligation)

8:15 am – English Mass 12:05 pm – English Mass 5:00 pm – Vigil Mass New Year's Day: Wednesday Jan. 1 (day of obligation) 9 am Spanish Mass 11 am English Mass

Immaculate Conception~ St Mary's Church End of the Year Family Celebration 2019

December 31, 2019 from 8:00 pm - 2:00am Tickets Adults \$50.00 Children 12 a 16 \$25 Children under 12 Free

Mass Intentions for the week of December 21, to December 29, 2019

Saturday, December 21, 2019:

12:05 pm - John Moynihan Sr. + * Mary Ann Moynihan

5:00 pm - Leonard Spano +

7:30pm Salvador De La Rosa + * Bella Gonzalez

Sunday, December 22, 2019:

7:30 am - Magdalena Garcia + * Marilyn Figueroa

9:00 am - Onesimo Tovar + * Joaquin & Torivio Tovar Papas

11:00 am - Celio Rodrigues * Eduardo & Alejandra Rodrigues

Monday, December 23, 2019:

8:15am - George Mysry * H. H

12:05 pm - Maura W. Ledrick + * Catherine Reid

Tuesday December 24, 2019:

8:15am - For the Decease Member of St. Mary's

12:05 pm—Available/Disponibile

5:00 pm— Monsignor Hugh J. Corrigan * From the Parish

12:00am - For all the living and Decease Members of St. Mary's

Wednesday, December 25, 2019:

9:00am— For the Parish (Spanish Mass)

11:00 am - Decease Members of the Antao Duarte, Alves, &

Rodrigues Families * Michael Rodrigues

Thursday, December 26, 2019:

8:15am - Jerry Johnes * Anthony Kunny

12:05 pm - Rita Navarro *Josefa Navarro

7:00 pm—Carmen Martinez M. + * De Su Hija Julia Velasco

Friday, December 27, 2019:

8:15 am - Mrs. & Mr. Chacko + * Mrs. Bency Mathew

12:05 pm - Luis & Rafael Rodriguez + * Marta Vega

Saturday, December 28, 2019:

12:05 pm - For the Pichardo's decease Family + * Magaly Pichardo

5:00 pm - Joanne Kunny + * Anthony Kunny

7:30pm Rafaela Navarro + * Cesar & Guadalupe Cuadra

Sunday, December 29, 2019:

7:30 am - For the Parish

9:00 am - Guadalupe Reyes * De La Familia

11:00 am - Juvenil & Celina Antao + * Eduardo & Alejandra Rodrigues

+Indicates deceased *Indicates the person (s) who requested the Mass.