

Homily of Fourth Sunday of Advent Year A, 2022

Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24:1-6; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24

Today we light the fourth purple candle which is called the candle of love. The circle is complete. St. Paul assures us that Hope does not disappoint (Romans 5:5). Hope brings us Peace. Peace brings us Joy. Joy brings us Love. "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16). To live in God is to live in Jesus Christ who is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). May the Advent journey and Christmas celebration enable us to live in Christ and become channels of God's love.

Mary said yes to angel Gabriel to become the channel through which Jesus came into the world. In the same way, God has been inviting us throughout the Advent journey to become channels of God's love in our world. This is what St. Paul means in the second reading where he says, "We have received the grace of apostleship" (Romans 1:5). We are, therefore, apostles and messengers of God's love. An apostle or a messenger listens to the voice of his master or her mistress and does the will of his master or her mistress, not his or her own will.

In the first reading, Ahaz, the king of Judah, refused to trust God and do what God commanded him to do. At that time, Ahaz was surrounded by his enemies, the king of Damascus and the king of Samaria. Ahaz was frightened. God sent Isaiah to him to encourage him not to panic, and not to seek support from pagan nations. Ahaz refused and aligned himself with the king of Assyria, built pagan altars and led the people astray. Ahaz was defeated, and history records that more than 120,000 of his soldiers were killed, and over 200,000 Judeans were carried off as captives to Damascus.

During difficult times, let us not panic or seek solution through wrongful means. God does not approve solutions through wrongful means. Any apparent solution through wrongful means is bound to fail or will sooner or later results in disaster. Therefore, let us always trust God and wait for him to act (Psalm 37).

In today's gospel, Joseph faced a difficult situation. He was not responsible for Mary's pregnancy. The gospel tells us that Joseph, being a righteous man, was unwilling to expose Mary to shame. He decided to divorce her quietly. Unlike Ahaz, Joseph listened to the message of the angel of the Lord and did what God directed him to do. He did not divorce Mary. He took her as his wife, and by so doing, he became the foster father of Jesus.

Always, in one way or another, God sends us messages. Do we listen to him? Indeed, we have a lot to learn from Joseph's response to the news of Mary's pregnancy.

In ancient Israel, women were given to marriage at a very young age. Most girls were betrothed before they were fourteen years old. With such culture, premarital sex was very rare. However, in the Old Testament, there are harsh punishments for premarital sex and premarital or extramarital pregnancy. For instance, if a man marries a girl who was presented to be a virgin, and later he finds out that she is not a virgin, "they shall bring the young woman to the entrance of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a shameful crime in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house" (Deuteronomy 22:19-21). Joseph had concluded not to subject Mary to such shameful and cruel punishment even before the angel of the Lord visited him with instructions from God. Joseph, surely, was a devout Jew, but not a slave of the law. How often do we judge and punish others without mercy! Joseph's self-control, understanding, compassion, and obedience to God's will are a challenge to us.

Today's gospel tells us that 'Emmanuel' means "God is with us" (Matthew 1:23). Yes, Jesus is God made flesh. He is the reason for the season. Therefore, over and above the commercial and social activities of the season, Jesus remains the reason for the season.

Through him, God is with us always to the end of time (Matthew 20:28). God be with us this Christmas season. God be with us as the year 2022 is ending. God be with us when the new year begins. With you, O God, no one can be against us. Amen.

Fr. Martin Eke, MSP