

4th Sunday of Advent - A
Isaiah 7:10-14;
Romans 1:1-7;
Matthew 1:18-24
Little Flower - 12/22/19

My Brothers and Sisters,

The Gospels of the last two Sundays have focused on John the Baptist. Today's Gospel focuses on Mary and Joseph.

All three readings today refer to Mary either directly or indirectly. In today's first reading, God through Isaiah prophesies that "*...the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.*" In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote that Jesus was "*descended from David according to the flesh,*" an indirect reference to Mary. Finally, in today's Gospel, the angel tells Joseph that Mary has conceived Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Matthew then reminds us that this was the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, which is the prophecy we heard in the first reading.

However, today's Gospel also gives us a critical insight into Joseph. When he discovered that Mary was pregnant, we are told that he was a righteous man and was going to divorce her quietly. Because of this verse, St. Joseph is often referred to as St. Joseph the Just. Therefore, we need to reflect on what it means to be righteous or just. Unfortunately, both of these words can have negative connotations. Righteous is often understood as self-righteous. Justice is often understood as legalism.

On the other hand, in today's second reading, Paul addresses his letter "*to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy.*" Some translations substitute the word *saints* for *holy*. To be holy, to be saints, we have to be righteous and just. Therefore, we have to ask what it means to be holy, what it means to be a saint, in order to answer what it means to be righteous and just.

According to Fr. Eugene Hensell, a Scripture scholar at St. Meinrad, the word *righteousness* in Matthew's Gospel refers to a right relationship with God, others, and self. Joseph Goldbrunner wrote a small book entitled *Holiness Is Wholeness*. As persons, wholeness is found in a right relationship with God, others, and self. I would add, and I think Pope Francis would agree, that wholeness also necessarily includes a right relationship with the world. Wholeness, holiness, righteousness, and justice are all found in a right relationship with God, others, the world, and ourselves.

A more contemporary way to understand what it means to become holy is author Matthew Kelly's constant challenge to become the-best-version-of-ourselves. In his judgment, becoming the-best-version-of-ourselves means becoming holy, but we can only become the-best-version-of-ourselves if we live in right relationships with God, others, the world, and ourselves.

This Church year almost all our Sunday Gospels will come from Matthew's Gospel. Matthew builds his Gospel around the theme of Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." Before Jesus' birth, he is already identified with Emmanuel in the prophecy of Isaiah. The final words of Matthew's Gospel are Jesus' final words to his disciples before ascending into heaven: "*And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age*" [28:20]. Even in the middle of the Gospel, Jesus explicitly promises to be with his disciples: "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*" [18:20]. This suggests that one of the key themes of Matthew's Gospel is presence—God's presence in Jesus and Jesus' promise of presence to us wherever and whenever we are gathered in Jesus' name until the end of time.

My brothers and sisters, what does all of this mean to us today? The first reading talked about signs. It seems to me that as Christians called to share the Good News of Jesus with others, we have to constantly look for signs of Jesus' presence within and among us and then be willing to share those signs with others. After all, Christmas is about Jesus becoming human and living among us as a human. Second, the best way we can become signs of God's presence within and among us is by becoming holy, by becoming the-best-version-of-ourselves, living in right relationships with God, others, the world, and ourselves.