

St. Mary's Holy Communion Sunday 18th December 2016

4th Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:10-16

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

well, the wait is nearly over, Christmas is nearly here – are you nearly ready? it certainly makes a big difference to me, Christmas Day falling on a Sunday; usually I have to get ready for a Sunday either just before or just after Christmas, which can be tricky!

with so much to get ready, it is hard to sustain that attitude of 'waiting in hope' that we have been working on through these weeks; yet it's important that we try to do so, that we don't anticipate the Big Day too much

so to mark that steady progression, today we light the fourth candle, the one that represents Mary in her Advent waiting; for her this is the waiting of pregnancy, which has its own special character

Paula Gooder's Advent book, 'The Meaning is in the Waiting', has been referred to a couple of times in these sermons; in her introduction she describes her first experience of pregnancy, where she had to learn to wait in a new way

for the waiting of pregnancy can't be hurried or fretted over, as if one should want it to be any shorter; there is the hope of a happy outcome, but this waiting must run its full term; a shortened pregnancy too often means trouble, loss, and heartbreak; instead, Gooder writes:

'one of the things I learned was that to savour the time of waiting allows us to appreciate the event when it comes; the more we are constantly looking forwards to better times that may be coming, the more we miss the present, and the harder it is to appreciate the future moment even when it does come. Many people speak of the deep sense of anti-climax on Christmas Day when that long-anticipated day does not live up to expectations. One of the many reasons we wait in Advent is to hone our skills of being joyfully and fully present now. Then Christmas Day can gain a depth and meaning that would otherwise fly past in a whirl of presents and mince pies.'

so I want to savour the waiting, to stay with the anticipation of the Saviour's birth; for this we have Matthew's account today, which typically emphasises the connections with the past and the fulfilment of prophecy; and in this Matthew lays great store by *names*

the first part of Chapter One is a list of names, the genealogy of Joseph, 'the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus'; a key name in that list, the only one that occurs in all three of today's readings is – look carefully – it is David!

Isaiah's warning (which we'll come back to) is to 'the house of David'; in Romans Paul describes Jesus as 'descended from David according to the flesh'; while here in Matthew, the angel addresses Joseph as 'son of David'

Matthew's is the only gospel to tell the story of this waiting from Joseph's point of view, and is keen to present him as an active participant in the story, rather than a shadowy figure on the sidelines

engaged to this young girl – a formal agreement that would not lightly be set aside – Joseph is shocked, of course, by her pregnancy and, we guess, baffled by her story of an angelic visitor and divine conception

Joseph, we're told, is a 'righteous' man, he wants to follow the dictates of the law, but he's unwilling to exact the full penalty of the law (death by stoning) – so, what to do for the best?

in a dream (the first of several in Matthew), Joseph receives reassurance and is commissioned for his task as father to this unexpected child; and the angel's message hinges on two more names:

'Jesus' is the Greek form of the Hebrew 'Yehoshua' or 'Joshua'; it means 'the LORD saves', 'for he will save his people from their sins'; that understanding of God as 'saviour' is deeply rooted in Jewish history, most notably in the Exodus from Egypt, and in the return from Exile in Babylon; 'Jesus' is a beautiful, resonant name, a fresh sign of God's intentions towards his people

the second name is an even more beautiful one, 'Emmanuel', 'God with us'; again, God has always been with his people, from Abraham onwards, but here is a sign of something new, a new presence, a new with-ness, focused in this child that Mary is to bear

Matthew is, of course, referring here to those words from Isaiah 7 that we read today, so let's take a brief look at that passage:

rather confusingly, the lectionary takes us back this week, to an earlier point in the story than we read about last week; the current threat to Judah and Jerusalem is from the kings of Israel and Aram; King Ahaz is looking around for some solution, but trusting in the God of his ancestors is not one of his options, and he refuses God's generous offer that he should ask for a sign of hope in his troubles; his answer, 'I won't test God', betrays his lack of trust in what God is able to

so Isaiah tells him rather testily what sign God will give – a child, and a name; or not really a name at all – in the Hebrew it is two words, 'immanu-el', 'with us – God'

my heart always sinks a bit when parents bring a child for baptism with a name they have made up, usually some random sequence of syllables, and I wonder how is the poor child is going to live with this name?! but such names have no meaning in themselves

by contrast, the 'names' that Isaiah is told to give – to this child, and to his own at other points – are not really names, but short phrases, that express God's intentions: Shear-Yashub, 'a remnant shall return', and my favourite, Maher-Shalal-Hashbaz, 'quick to plunder, swift to the spoil' – not a name a child is going to find easy to live with, or that will fit neatly into a line of a hymn like the name, 'Emmanuel'!

so, what about this name, 'Emmanuel'? what does God intend here?

this year I have been working my way through a deep and at times quite challenging book by Samuel Wells, 'A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God'; his Prologue is entitled 'The Most Important Word'; what would you say that the most important word in the Bible is? love? God? Jesus? for Wells it is the word 'with'

he starts by picturing Christmas scenes, in which we are busy doing things *for* people – family, friends, people in need – and how all that activity can make us miss the real point of Christmas

we may cook food, buy presents, give to the poor, all in the Christmas spirit of love and generosity; but if we fail properly to be *with* those people, we will not have understood the purpose of Jesus' coming at all

yes, Jesus has come to do something *for* us, he will 'save his people from their sins'; but above he comes to be *with* us; as we read in John 1 every year: 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God ... and the Word became flesh and *dwelt with/among* us'

Wells writes: 'the word that describes the heart of God and the nature of God's purpose and destiny for us – that word is *with*; God's whole life and action are shaped to be *with* us'

to link back to our Advent 'waiting in hope'; as Anna said at the start of Advent, that waiting is for past, present and future; so we could say that God being with us has already happened, it is happening right now, and it will continue to its ultimate fulfilment; we are always waiting for God to be 'with us'

but it's nearly Christmas 2016, the feast of 'Emmanuel', 'God with us' is upon us; this particular season of waiting will come to an end; what then?

for Mary and Joseph, when the waiting of pregnancy is over, we know that there is more waiting to come for them, and some of that will be very hard, as they flee for their lives from King Herod and wait for an opportunity to return home; as they wait and wonder about the destiny of this child about whom such strange things are said; and especially as Mary watches and waits for the approach of that inevitable end in the crucifixion of her son

sometimes our waiting is hard, for the progress of an illness, or the onset of old age, or the unavoidable reality of death, for ourselves or for others; Paula Gooder writes, 'waiting for that which we most dread requires a depth and quality of waiting beyond all other types of waiting; but there we discover the silent, brooding presence of God, who lingers with us in our agony'

here is 'Emmanuel' indeed – 'God with us' all along, even when we don't understand or see it; at Christmas our waiting is not over, but fresh substance is given to our hope; 'God is with us' and there we find meaning in our waiting, whatever the future may hold