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Emmanuel: the Plea and the Promise

Biblical Reflection for 4th Sunday of Advent, Year A

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, DEC. 14, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we listen attentively to the words of the prophet Isaiah, to the dream of Joseph, and the promise of the eternal God that takes flesh in the womb of the Virgin. The birth of Jesus into human history was the true fulfillment of the hopes and longings, dreams and desires of the people of ancient Israel.

Sign of Isaiah

In the first reading from the prophet Isaiah (7:10-14), King Ahaz expresses in a hypocritical way his preference for depending upon the might of Assyria rather than upon God (v 12). The sign proposed by Isaiah (v 14) was concerned with the preservation of Judah in the midst of distress but more especially with the fulfillment of God's earlier promise to David (2 Samuel 7:12-16) in the coming of Emmanuel as the ideal king (cf. Isaiah 9:5-6; 11:1-5).

The Church has always followed Matthew's Gospel story in seeing the fulfillment of this verse (7:14) in Christ and his Virgin Mother. The prophet Isaiah need not have known the full force hidden deep within his own words. Some have sought a preliminary and partial fulfillment in the conception and birth of the future King Hezekiah, whose mother, at the time Isaiah spoke, would have been a young, unmarried woman "almah" in Hebrew. The Holy Spirit was preparing, however, for another birth which would fulfill Emmanuel's mission, and in which the perpetual virginity of the Mother of God was to fulfill the words of this prophesy.

Fulfillment in Jesus

Matthew's entire Gospel is about the scriptures being fulfilled in Jesus. In the genealogy (1:1-17), Jesus is the culmination point toward which Israel's long covenant history has been leading, particularly its puzzling and tragic latter phase. Matthew agrees with his Jewish contemporaries that the exile was the last significant event before Jesus; when the angel says that Jesus will "save his people from their sins" (1:21), liberation from exile is in view. Matthew's infancy narrative (1:1-2:23) forms the prologue of his Gospel.

Consisting of a genealogy and five stories, it presents the coming of Jesus as the climax of Israel's history, and the events of his conception, birth, and early childhood as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Matthew tells us that Jesus' birth in human history fulfills at least three biblical themes. He brings Israel into the Promised Land; "Jesus" is the Greek for "Joshua." As Emmanuel, "God with us," Jesus embodies God's presence with his people (Isaiah 7:14, quoted in 1:23). As the new David, Jesus is the Messiah born at Bethlehem (2:5, fulfilling Micah 5:1-3).

The first story of Matthew's infancy narrative (vv. 18-25) spells out what is summarily indicated in Matthew 1:16. The virginal conception of Jesus is the work of the Spirit of God. Joseph's decision to divorce Mary is

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overcome by the heavenly command that he take her into his home and accept the child as his own. The natural genealogical line is broken but the promises to David are fulfilled; through Joseph's adoption the child belongs to the family of David. Matthew sees the virginal conception as the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14.

Righteousness of Joseph

Betrothal (v. 18) was the first part of the marriage, constituting a man and woman as husband and wife. Subsequent infidelity was considered adultery. The betrothal was followed some months later by the husband's taking his wife into his home, at which time normal married life began. We are told that Joseph was a righteous man (v. 19), a devout observer of the Mosaic law. Joseph wished to break his union with someone whom he suspected of gross violation of the law. It is commonly said that the law required him to do so, but the texts usually given in support of that view, such as Deuteronomy 22:20-21, do not clearly pertain to Joseph's situation.

Echoes of the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the expression "the angel of the Lord" (v. 20) was a common designation of God in communication with a human being. The dreams mentioned in Matthew's story (2:13, 19, 22) may be meant to recall the dreams of Joseph, son of Jacob the patriarch (Genesis 37:5-11:19). A closer parallel is the dream of Amram, father of Moses, related by Josephus (*Antiquities* 2,9,3; 212, 215-16). The Hebrew name Jesus (v. 21) in first-century Judaism recalls the name Joshua (Greek "Iesous") meaning "Yahweh helps" and was interpreted to mean "the Lord saves."

God is with us

In Matthew 1:23 we have the evocative word "Emmanuel" -- "God is with us." God's promise of deliverance to Judah in Isaiah's time is seen by Matthew as fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, in whom God is with his people. "Emmanuel" is also alluded to at the end of Matthew's Gospel where the risen Jesus assures his disciples of his continued presence: "I am with you always, until the end of the age" (28:20). God did indeed keep his promise in Jesus. Jesus truly fulfills the plan of God in word and deed, in desire and presence, in flesh and blood.

In the name "Emmanuel," we find the answer to humanity's deepest longings for God throughout the ages. Emmanuel is both a prayer and plea (on our behalf) and a promise and declaration on God's part. When we pronounce the word, we are really praying and pleading: "God, be with us!" And when God speaks it, the almighty, eternal, omnipresent Creator of the world is telling us: "I am with you" in this Child. In the baby Jesus, God is "with us," not merely to bless us in some sort of cameo appearance at one difficult moment in history. Nor is God with us in that he is going to use Jesus to help us, protect us, rescue us from danger and guide us. No -- the little Lord Jesus asleep in the manger of Bethlehem is "God with us" because he is God.

More than the other evangelists, Matthew takes great care to note that events in Jesus' life happened "so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled" (2:23). Finally in Verse 25, we find the expression "until she (Mary) bore a son." Matthew the evangelist is concerned to emphasize that Joseph was not responsible for the conception of Jesus. The Greek word translated "until" does not imply normal marital conduct after Jesus' birth, nor does it exclude it.

Eschatological dimension

This week, continue reading Benedict XVI's apostolic exhortation "Verbum Domini," especially the section that speaks about "The eschatological dimension of the word of God."

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The Pope writes: "In all of this, the Church gives voice to her awareness that with Jesus Christ she stands before the definitive word of God: he is 'the first and the last' (Revelation 1:17). He has given creation and history their definitive meaning; and hence we are called to live in time and in God's creation within this eschatological rhythm of the word; 'thus the Christian dispensation, since it is the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ' (cf. 1 Timothy 6:14 and Titus 2:13).

"Indeed, as the fathers noted during the synod, the "uniqueness of Christianity is manifested in the event which is Jesus Christ, the culmination of revelation, the fulfillment of God's promises and the mediator of the encounter between man and God. He who 'has made God known' (John 1:18) is the one, definitive word given to mankind.

"St. John of the Cross expresses this truth magnificently: 'Since he has given us his Son, his only word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything at once in this sole word -- and he has no more to say. ... Because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has spoken all at once by giving us this All who is his Son. Any person questioning God or desiring some vision or revelation would be guilty not only of foolish behavior but also of offending him, by not fixing his eyes entirely on Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty.'

"Consequently, the synod pointed to the need to 'help the faithful to distinguish the word of God from private revelations' whose role 'is not to "complete" Christ's definitive revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history.' The value of private revelations is essentially different from that of the one public revelation: The latter demands faith. In it, God himself speaks to us through human words and the mediation of the living community of the Church. The criterion for judging the truth of a private revelation is its orientation to Christ himself. If it leads us away from him, then it certainly does not come from the Holy Spirit, who guides us more deeply into the Gospel, and not away from it.

"Private revelation is an aid to this faith, and it demonstrates its credibility precisely because it refers back to the one public revelation. Ecclesiastical approval of a private revelation essentially means that its message contains nothing contrary to faith and morals; it is licit to make it public and the faithful are authorized to give to it their prudent adhesion. A private revelation can introduce new emphases, give rise to new forms of piety, or deepen older ones. It can have a certain prophetic character (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21) and can be a valuable aid for better understanding and living the Gospel at a certain time; consequently, it should not be treated lightly. It is a help, which is proffered, but its use is not obligatory. In any event, it must be a matter of nourishing faith, hope and love, which are for everyone the permanent path of salvation" ("Verbum Domini," No. 14).

[The readings for the 4th Sunday of Advent are Isaiah 7:10-14; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24]

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