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# Emmanuel, the Prayer and the Promise

## Biblical Reflection for Vigil Mass for Christmas Eve Year C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, DEC. 21, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- The Gospel for the liturgy of Christmas Eve, taken from Matthew's infancy narrative (1:1-25), provides a wide-angle view of the Incarnation event, against a rich, biblical panorama.

More than Mark and Luke, Matthew stresses the Jewish origin of Jesus: The genealogy presents him as "son of David, son of Abraham" (1:1) and goes back no further. Matthew is concerned with 14 generations, probably because 14 is the numerical value of the Hebrew letters forming the name of David.

Of the two genealogies of Jesus in the New Testament -- found in Matthew and Luke -- that of Matthew's Gospel is presented in a descending order, listing the ancestors of Jesus, son of Mary, beginning from Abraham.

The one found in Luke's Gospel (3:23-38), is in ascending order, beginning with Jesus and going back to Adam.

While Luke's genealogy links Jesus with the whole of humanity, Matthew's genealogy makes evident the fact that he was of the offspring of Abraham. It is as a son of Israel -- God's Chosen People in the old covenant, to which he directly belongs -- that Jesus of Nazareth is fully a member of the human family.

While the genealogy shows the continuity of God's providential plan from Abraham on, discontinuity is also present. The women Tamar (1:3), Rahab and Ruth (1:5), and the wife of Uriah, Bathsheba (1:6), bore their sons through unions that were in varying degrees strange and unexpected.

These "irregularities" culminate in the great "irregularity" of the Messiah's birth of a young virgin. Matthew has taken care to draw our attention to the peculiarities of these biblical women of the Old Testament, perhaps in order to warn us that something even stranger is coming, or perhaps to enable us, when the news is announced, to connect it with God's strange way of operating in the past. Our God certainly writes straight with crooked lines, and this genealogy is living proof of that fact!

### Prophecies fulfilled

Matthew's Gospel is about the scriptures being fulfilled in Jesus. The angel, the dream, the command not to be afraid, the righteous couple doing what they are told -- all is very familiar to anyone reading and listening to the story with biblical lenses.

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, he embodies God's presence with his

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people (Isaiah 7:14, quoted in 1:23). As the new David, he is the Messiah born at Bethlehem (2:5, fulfilling Micah 5:1-3).

In the genealogy, 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.

Jesus, David's true descendant, will fulfill the covenant of Abraham by undoing the exile and all that it entailed.

Drawing upon both biblical tradition and Jewish stories, Matthew portrays Jesus as reliving the Exodus experience of Israel and the persecutions of Moses. His rejection by his own people and his passion are foreshadowed by the troubled reaction of "all Jerusalem" to the question of the magi who are seeking the "newborn king of the Jews" (2:2-3), and by Herod's attempt to have him killed.

The magi who do him homage prefigure the Gentiles who will accept the preaching of the Gospel. The infancy narrative proclaims who Jesus is, the savior of his people from their sins (1:21), Emmanuel -- "God is with us" (1:23), and the Son of God (2:15).

Jesus' mission during his public life is limited "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24), and he assigns the same limits to the mission of the Twelve (10:5-6). 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).

Jesus himself makes it clear that he has come not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it (5:17). This extraordinary history and story, guided from the very beginning by the powerful hand of the God of the covenant, finds its fulfillment in Jesus, "who is called Christ" (1:16).

The term "Christ" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word "Messiah," which means "Anointed." Israel, God's chosen people, had lived for generations in expectation of the fulfillment of the promise of the Messiah, whose coming was prepared by the history of the covenant.

### Joseph's perspective

Matthew's story is told from Joseph's point of view, while the more familiar account from Luke is told from the perspective of Mary. Joseph, a righteous man, is presented as a devout observer of the Mosaic law (1:19). His betrothal to Mary was the first part of the marriage, constituting a man and woman as husband and wife. Subsequent infidelity was considered adultery. Some months after the betrothal, the husband would take his wife into his home, at which time normal married life began.

The virginal conception of Jesus is the work of the Spirit of God. Matthew sees the virginal conception as the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. Joseph's decision to divorce Mary is 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.

Given the circumstances, Joseph wished to break his union with someone whom he suspected of egregious violation of the law. It is commonly said that the law required him to do so, but the texts are usually given in support of that view, (e.g., Deuteronomy 22:20-21 does not clearly pertain to Joseph's situation). He was unwilling to expose her to shame: The penalty for proved adultery was death by stoning (cf Deuteronomy 22:21-23).

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In another obvious reference and link to the Old Testament, Joseph of the New Testament receives the Lord's message in a dream, from the "angel of the Lord." These dreams 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 in his Antiquities.

Joseph protected and provided for Jesus and Mary. He named Jesus, taught him how to pray, how to work, how to be a man. While no words or texts are attributed to him, we can be sure that Joseph pronounced two of the most important words that could ever be spoken, and that happened when he named his son "Jesus" and called him "Emmanuel."

God truly with us

On Christmas Eve, we listen attentively to the words of the prophets, to the dream of Joseph, and the promise of the eternal God that takes flesh in the womb of the Virgin. It becomes clear to us that the story of the birth of a baby in Bethlehem was no idyllic country folk tale. It was the true fulfillment of the hopes and longings, dreams and desires of the people of ancient Israel.

God does not abandon humanity, but rather enters into all that frequently makes life on earth so difficult. God's promise of deliverance to Judah at the time of the prophets is seen by Matthew as fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, in whom God is with his people.

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, and guide us. No -- the little Lord Jesus asleep in the manger of Bethlehem is "God with us" because he is God.

The true message of Christmas takes our breath away and continues to stagger the imagination: The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the only begotten Son of the Father, the eternal Word, our Creator wills to clothe himself in our nature, and to become man, our brother, one of us. God Himself lies in the manger, completely human, completely Divine.

The shepherds went back to the fields rejoicing in Luke's marvelous Christmas story and the wise men bow down in wonder, awe and worship in Matthew's account because they realized what was unfolding before their very eyes: They were in the presence of their Creator made man, of the Word made flesh, of God becoming one of us.

The name 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.

An exaggerated demand

Let us give thanks to the God and Father of Jesus who writes straight with the crooked lines of our own lives and of human history. May Emmanuel find welcome in our hearts and take flesh in our lives at Christmas this year.

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Let's conclude with the words of "The Mystery of Christmas" of St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross:

"In order to penetrate a whole human life with the divine life it is not enough to kneel once a year before the crib and let ourselves be captivated by the charm of the holy night. To achieve this, we must be in daily contact with God. [...] Just as our earthly body needs its daily bread, so the divine life must be constantly fed. 'This is the living bread that came down from heaven.'

"If we make it truly our daily bread, the mystery of Christmas, the Incarnation of the Word, will daily be re-enacted in us. And this, it seems, is the surest way to remain in constant union with God. [...] I am well aware that many think this an exaggerated demand. In practice it means for most of those who start the habit that they will have to rearrange their outer and inner life completely. But this is just what it is meant to do. Is it really demanding too much to make room in our life for the Eucharistic Savior, so that He may transform our life into His own?"

[The readings for the Christmas vigil are Isaiah 62:1-5; Acts 13:16-17, 22-25; and Matthew 1:1-25 or 1:18-25]

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