

Advent 4 – St Aidan’s and Wesley 10.30am – 22nd December 2013

Theme: “Signs”

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25

Text: ‘Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.’ Isa 7:14

Introduction

All around us there are signs that Christmas is fast approaching.

There is the advertising, in all its forms, announcing that this or that is the best gift to buy for Christmas for the one you love. Christmas cards are appearing in the post to make us feel guilty for the ones we haven’t sent or the ones who weren’t on our list this year. There are the piped carols and other Christmas music in the shops. There are the pre-Christmas parties as various groups break for holidays. There are the Christmas lights around the neighbourhood bringing out people to come and marvel at the larger displays. There are the Christmas appeals for money and toys and other things to help those in need. There are the travel and family arrangements as to where Christmas meals will be held this year. It is all go, go, go!!

But where is the sign of Christ in all this? Where is the true meaning of Christmas being spoken about? Unfortunately only in a minority of places called churches and affiliated charities along with a minority of Australians who openly call themselves Christians. Hence Christmas for us is a faith challenge – to live out our faith and to witness personally to Christ.

Readings for today

Into this situation we have the set readings, one from Isaiah in which we think we know quite well a few of the verses and the other the Matthew account of the birth of Jesus. Let us look particularly at the Isaiah 7 set passage with a couple of comments on the Gospel.

Isaiah 7:10-16 is the second part of a story about an encounter between the prophet Isaiah and the Judean King Ahaz. This locates the story during the Syro-Ephramite conflict of 734-733BC when the kings of Ephraim and Aram attempted to invade Jerusalem and replace King Ahaz with a puppet ruler who would support their coalition against Assyria. Although we learn immediately that the invasion was unsuccessful (Isa 7:1), the events of the story take place before its outcome is known. Ahaz and his subjects are terrified at the impending attack which threatens not only the survival of the nation but also the promise that a descendent of David would always reign in Jerusalem. In the time of national terror, YHWH sends Isaiah to reassure Ahaz of divine protection.

We are unsure of the time-line of vss 1-9 but it appears that Ahaz had not demonstrated the faith Isaiah had demanded. As a result the prophet offers him a sign, in spite of the king’s objections in Isa 7:12. It is here that we have the well-loved promise of God to his people that is re-iterated in the Matthean birth account of Jesus today.

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign:

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” Isa 7:14

The birth of this child, by the time of his weaning, will see the threat against Jerusalem as having past. This is the original setting for this prophetic prediction. This prophesy talks of a young woman (Hebrew is ‘almah’) who is already pregnant and will give birth in the near future, as suggested by the Hebrew construction ‘harah weyoledet’ (‘is with child and shall give birth’ v14). It is of course interesting to see the terminology of ‘almah’, literally denoting a woman of marriageable age but saying nothing of her sexual experience. This is different to the Hebrew term ‘betulah’ (literally a virgin) which is not used here. Naturally

it raises the debate of the virgin birth of Jesus which is a New Testament theological issue, which much store has been placed on the words used as scholars have debated this issue over the years.

Certainly in theological college this was a topic of debate with our Old Testament and Hebrew lecturer, the Rev Dr Charles Biggs.

As a total aside, which really didn't help the debate at all, but was a lot of fun, I played a small trick on Charles. His family had a doe rabbit and we had a buck rabbit, and the two were introduced late one night for literally not even a 'one night stand'. Naturally about 4 weeks later along came a litter of baby rabbits, which of course we told Charles was proof of the virgin birth!! Almost 40 years on I can now tell that story but at the time Charles was not amused!!

In this prophesy we do not know who the woman was. Some scholars suggest it was Ahaz's wife, others Isaiah's wife but we really do not know. However the name Immanuel, God with us, evoked hope for the people of God in a time when they needed it. So it is also with the birth of Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David. In Matthew 1:9c we read "Ahaz the father of Hezekiah". Here is part of the link between the Hebrew Scriptures with the birth of Jesus. 'Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph' – this pledge was more binding than a modern day engagement and could only be broken by divorce.

Because of Mary's pregnancy, Joseph is looking to divorce her but his mind is changed through 'the Lord appearing to him in a dream' (Matthew 1:20). This phrase appears five times in the first two chapters of Matthew and is the way the Lord used to communicate with Joseph. Certainly, in parts of the Hebrew Scriptures this is also the way God communicated with various people. The Isaiah 7:14 prophesy is quoted here again but this time in relation to Jesus and not to a child to be born in Ahaz's time. However, it is still seen with Jesus that this is the one promised so long ago.

Joseph takes Mary as his wife and does as God has commanded in the dream.

Hence we have the beginning of the story of Jesus Christ, the gift of God to mankind. The symbol of 'God with us' with the defining attributes of the Advent candles of hope, peace, joy and love – gifts of God for we who are the people of God.

Conclusion

So we approach Christmas this year. We come from our busyness and our frenetic preparations, to the relative quiet and reflectiveness of our worship. May we take the Christ centredness of Christmas into the next few days. May we take the certainty of 'God with us' as we step not simply into and through Christmas but into the New Year and our everyday lives.

Prayer

God of Mary and Joseph, keep alive in us the faith that you are still at work in ordinary people, accomplishing extra-ordinary things. When we become anxious and cannot discern your pattern in the jigsaw of our affairs, bring us back to the basics of trust and obedience. Lead us forward, one step at a time, one day at a time. Give us humility to leave the overall picture to your generous and ingenious providence. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.