

HOMILY SUNDAY ADVENT 4-A

“Opening up to Newness”

(Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24)

Are you afraid of the unknown?

Today, the Word of God invites us to have faith, let go of sin and open ourselves to the newness of life with God.

The readings for this last Sunday of Advent are all about identity and role. In terms of identity, Jesus is Emmanuel, Messiah, Lord, Saviour, Son of God, King of glory, the fulfilment of prophecy. In terms of role, as Saviour Jesus liberates us from sin – *harmatia* – which means missing the mark.

Our identity and role becomes clearer in the light of his. We are called to be saints; apostles; to belong to Jesus; to be filled with grace. Our role is to let go of sin and to open ourselves to the new life that God wants to give us in Christ, to the “obedience of faith,” a life free from addiction and sin, focused on the Word of God. We are to let the King of Glory into our lives and surrender to him.

The readings are very appropriate for today, the last Sunday of Advent – our last day to prepare ourselves for the celebration of the coming of Jesus into this world historically two millennium ago. The best way we can prepare is to obey God’s Word and place our trust in him today as Lord and Saviour, son of God and Emmanuel. We can let him forgive us and heal us, and we will experience salvation (the peace and joy that only He can give) right here and now, in our lives. What we celebrate at Christmas, then, is not just that first coming of Jesus, but also his present coming into our lives to save us from our own darkness.

In his commentary on today’s readings, Corbin Eddy offers some interesting insights. He writes that in the complicated political situation that threatens to pit the sister nations of Israel in the north and Judah in the south against each other in unholy alliances with Syria and Assyria respectively, King Ahaz is afraid to move, to pray, to ask for a sign that Isaiah claims God will give him. We may not understand exactly why he hesitates, but we can conjecture. For him to do so, something would have to give, to change in his life. It is not reverence for God but his unwillingness to risk giving up control that keeps him from presenting himself to the Lord in faith. Ahaz is afraid to move, to grow, to change. Something in all of us is afraid to pray, to expose ourselves to God, because something may have to give. Genuine prayer requires a certain flexibility and readiness for a sign. Genuine prayer contains within it an invitation to grow and change.

Ahaz reflects something very deep in human nature, which we may discover in ourselves. Many addicts refuse to talk about their addiction or seek help, because they are afraid to change, to let go of the certain security in the control they think they have. I remember years ago visiting an alcoholic in the hospital who was dying from cirrhosis of the liver. He was bloated and barely coherent. I encouraged him to seek help, and was greatly saddened by his response to my parting, “I hope to see you again.” He muttered, “Don’t tell anyone I am here.”

What a tragedy – here he was dying of alcoholism yet still too proud to admit his need for help. He

was afraid of the unknown and could not reach out. He died two weeks later, leaving behind a widow and four young children. I pray for him to this day.

The Advent scriptures speak of readiness for something new, a renewed call to holiness, to conversion of heart. We may be pious and religious but are we ready for something like that? The Christian tradition sees the birth of Jesus as the ultimate sign that Ahaz is looking for, even though he cannot admit it or deal with it. Arising from his family and race is “God-is-with-us.” This stretches Isaiah’s original direction, but the Advent liturgy sees Isaiah’s ultimate goal reached in Jesus. He is God’s image and likeness restored, the great sign of what we, even in the midst of our personal and political struggles, are invited to be and to become. And the sign is given, whether we are ready or not. We are invited to respond, “Amen.”

Using the figure of Joseph, who decided to care for the person and dignity of Mary rather than adhere strictly to the Law, Matthew wants to instruct his Church in being “righteous” in a way that respects both the Law of the Bible, and the Christian orientation to love, even if it seems to violate the Law. Thus Joseph stands, at the beginning of the Gospel, as a model of what Matthew hopes for all disciples, the ability to live the tension between the prevailing understanding of God’s commandments and the new thing that God is doing in Jesus. By Joseph’s decision to obey the startling and unexpected command of God, he is already living the heart of the Law and not the letter, already living out the new and higher righteousness of the kingdom. In a difficult moral situation, he attends to the voice of God, and he is willing to set aside his present understanding of God’s will in favor of the newness of this Word from the living and saving God.

The Eucharist we celebrate is a bridge between heaven and earth, between the past, the present and the future. We remember what Jesus did while on earth; we celebrate what he is doing even now, and we receive communion in anticipation of that heavenly banquet we will be part of in the future.

So have faith, let go of sin, and be open to the newness of God’s Word.