

4th Sunday of Advent (December 22nd, 2019)

Isaiah 7:10-14

In the eighth century before Christ, Syria had entered into an alliance with the northern kingdom of Israel against the southern kingdom of Judah. Ahaz, the king of the south, is tempted to ask Assyria (roughly Iraq) for help — which would also mean becoming a vassal of Assyria — but Isaiah advises King Ahaz to trust in God. Then when Isaiah tells him to ask for a sign that would confirm his words, the king refuses.⁵

10The Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying:

11Ask for a sign from the Lord, your God; let it be deep as the netherworld, or high as the sky! This meant an extraordinary or miraculous sign that would prove God's firm will to save the royal house of David from its oppressors.¹ Isaiah offered the king a sign of assurance that the campaign against him would be unsuccessful.¹¹ As proof positive that God intends to save Judah without the aid of foreign powers, the Lord is now willing to work a sign or miracle of whatever magnitude Ahaz requests.¹² This is essentially saying, "If you don't believe me, then ask me to prove it."¹⁰

12But Ahaz answered, "I will not ask! I will not tempt the Lord!" Ahaz responds with sham piety. The real reason for refusing a sign is that he does not want to listen to Isaiah's advice.¹⁰ Ahaz expresses in this hypocritical way his preference for depending upon the might of Assyria rather than upon God.¹

13Then Isaiah said: Listen, O house of David! Is it not enough for you to weary people, must you also weary my God? The king's rejection of the advice of God's prophet is tantamount to blasphemy, treating God in the same high-handed manner as he treats his subjects.¹⁰

14Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: Whether Ahaz likes it or not, he is going to be given something spectacular by way of a sign.¹⁰ **the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.** The name means "God is with us."¹¹ The tradition of the Church is unanimous that Mary and her virginal conception of Jesus fulfill this passage. It is the Davidic lineage that supplies "the flesh" of the Incarnation which we celebrate in this season. Jesus is a direct descendant of king Ahaz who was not much of a king by the reckoning of Isaiah, but God Himself was willing to claim him as a relative in order to enter the human condition.²

Romans 1:1-7

Most of Paul's letters were written back to churches he had founded. In this letter Paul was addressing a church he had not even visited. The letter serves as his introduction of himself in preparation for a visit to Rome.⁵ This reading appears on the Fourth Sunday of Advent because it makes the all-important point that the mission of Paul is to spread the good news of redemption to the whole world, beyond the Jews to include even the Gentiles.¹⁵

1Paul, This Roman name was taken by Saul of Tarsus (his Jewish name) and is the name by which he is known. Having both a Latin or Greek name and a Jewish name was common among Jews who lived outside of Israel.¹¹ **a slave of Christ Jesus,** The term "slave of God" had been used for Abraham, Moses and Joshua, so Paul places himself in their line as a chosen servant of God.³ **called to be an apostle** Paul right away calls himself an apostle, not to boast of his authority, but so that others will be moved to read the letter more earnestly and attentively.⁴ **and set apart** In Galatians 1:15 Paul says that he was set apart by God before he was born. **for the gospel of God,**
2which he promised previously through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, Here Paul speaks of the Gospel as having been prophesied and prefigured long ago in the Hebrew Scriptures. This

conviction is amply attested in Romans, where Paul appeals to the OT more than 60 times in the span of 16 chapters.⁴ The New Testament had not yet been written.

3the gospel about his son, descended from David according to the flesh,

4but established as Son of God in power It is this “Son of God in power” that is the other half of the Incarnation descended from David through Mary.² according to the Spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. Paul has here included two assertions that the Romans would have recognized as early statements of the Creed: Jesus was descended from David —which affirms that he was truly human and thus fulfilled Israel’s messianic hopes-- and he was recognized as the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.^{3,4}

5Through him we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about the obedience of faith, The “obedience of faith” means the obedience that springs from faith. The expression stands like two bookends both here at the beginning and again at the end of Romans in 16:26. It holds the epistle together around the central theme of faith, which is the act of trusting in God and entrusting oneself to God. Faith inspires love and is the indispensable basis for a living relationship with Christ.⁴ for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles,

6among whom are you also, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ;

7to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy. The OT expression “holy gathering” was used of the Israelites at the Exodus. It designated them as a people set apart and dedicated to Yahweh. Paul flatters the Roman Christians by adapting the OT expression and insinuating a new sense in which they are now the “holy called ones.”⁸ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew 1:18-24

BETROTHAL or engagement was a serious ceremony that had legal consequences as it could only be broken by death or divorce. It was arranged by elders in the family when the bride was at least 12 and the groom at least 13 and usually took place at the home of the father of the bride where she continued to reside. At this time the husband presented the marriage contract and the bride price. One or several years could separate this ceremony from the wedding. It was at the time of the second ceremony, the WEDDING, that the bride transferred from her father’s home to the home of the groom. DIVORCE was a written note signed by two witnesses that the husband divorced his wife and it meant that she was free to marry someone else.⁷

18This is how the birth of Jesus Christ This reference is important as a part of the genealogy because “Christ” means “the anointed one” which was the title given to a Davidic king when he was anointed at his coronation.⁶ This is a good time to remember that when we consider Jesus as king in the Davidic line, we consider Mary as queen because the kings often had innumerable wives (Solomon had 700) but they only had one mother and the common practice was that the mother of the king took the office of queen.⁹ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. “Through the Holy Spirit” indicates that Joseph discovered that Mary’s pregnancy was the result of a divine miracle.¹⁴

19Joseph her husband, In the genealogy of Jesus in verse 16, Joseph is referred to as the “husband of Mary” but not as the “father of Jesus.” since he was a righteous man, Joseph was a man who desired to observe the law.⁸ yet unwilling to expose her to shame, According to Deuteronomy, in the case of an engaged woman found not to be a virgin, she was to be returned to her father’s house and stoned to death by the men of the city on account of the disgrace brought upon her father’s house.⁷ decided to divorce her quietly. Matthew got his information from Joseph or his family. It

is thought that Matthew's father was a brother to St. Joseph, which would make Joseph an uncle to this gospel writer.⁵

20Such was this intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, Joseph was of the line of David as was named in the genealogy that preceded this selection and he is the legal father of the child because of his betrothal to Mary.⁷ do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. The annunciation to Mary is told in Luke and this visitation to Joseph by the angel is sometimes called the annunciation to Joseph.¹⁵

21She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, This name means "Yahweh saves." Even greater than Joshua, who led Israel into the Promised Land, Jesus leads God's people into the eternal land of heaven. Greater also than David for Jesus will save his people from their sins, not from their national enemies.¹⁴ because he will save his people from their sins."

22All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: Matthew, who wrote primarily for Jews, points out how this ancient prophecy was fulfilled in the life of Christ.³ The New Covenant consistently presents itself as fulfilling prophecies and promises made by God in the Old Covenant. Such conformity to statements and predictions made hundreds of years earlier, in defiance of all reasonable probabilities, proves beyond reasonable doubt that God "knows the end from the beginning." In this case it proves beyond reasonable doubt that Jesus is the Messiah. Prophecy fulfillment is the chief rational reason for Jews and others to accept Jesus as the Messiah. There have been more than fifty messianic pretenders in the last two thousand years of Jewish history, but none of them met the criteria laid down in the Old Testament concerning the identity of the Messiah; whereas Jesus met all of them that are applicable to his first coming.¹⁶

23Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, Matthew has given the child three titles in this reading: "Christ"—the anointed Davidic king who will restore the kingdom, "Jesus"—the one who will save his people from their sins and "Emmanuel"—God with us, for God is with his people again!⁶ which means "God is with us." The distinguishing characteristic of Christianity is that we believe that God has come among us to dwell as a man. As Catholics we believe that he also left us his flesh so that he could remain with us until the end of time. The whole of Catholic life centers around the belief that God has come into our midst and remained among us. While all of the sacraments make it so, he is also with us in the Church, in his Word, and most intimately in the Holy Eucharist.^{2,6}

24When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. Joseph's behavior shows that he accepted Jesus as his son. According to Jewish teaching, "If one say, 'This is my son,' he is to be believed." Thus Jesus, as a legally acknowledged son is entitled to inherit the throne of King David from Joseph, a descendant of David.¹⁶

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) "The New American Bible: Saint Joseph Edition," (2) The Commentary Notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Gray, (3) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1999" by Lawrence E. Mick, (4) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (5) "The Twelve: The Lives of the Apostles After Calvary" by C. Bernard Ruffin, (6) "Mystery Of The Kingdom" by Edward P. Sri, (7) "The Gospel of Matthew" by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., (8) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (9) "Catholic For A Reason: Scripture's Revelation of Mary" by Timothy Gray, (10) "Isaiah" by John E.A. Sawyer, (11) "Dictionary Of The Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (12) "The Book Of Isaiah Chapters 1-59" by M. McNamara, M.S.C., (13) "Workbook For Lectors and Gospel Readers: 1996" by Aelred Rosser, (14) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (15) "Theology For The Laity" by Fr. Paul K. Rafferty, O.P., and (16) "Jewish New Testament Commentary" by David H. Stern.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who originally compiled these commentaries.