

4th Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:10-14

Rom 1:1-7

Mt 1:18-25

I've often told people, "If you know you won't like the answer, don't ask the question." This was the situation for Ahaz king of Judah in 735 BC when the Middle East was dominated by the Assyrians. The king of Syria and the king of Israel (the Jewish northern kingdom) formed an alliance to try and halt the march of Assyria. These two kings turned up with their armies on Ahaz's doorstep in Jerusalem to 'persuade' him to join their alliance. God told Ahaz to ask for a sign about his political predicament. Ahaz refused pretending that he would not test God. The real reason was that Ahaz had decided to pay protection money to the Assyrians so that Judah would not be attacked. He didn't want God interfering with his plans.

Isaiah enters the situation and tells Ahaz that he could not mess with God who would give him a sign anyway. This would be the birth of a baby to a woman of the king's court whose name would be, 'Emmanuel' which means that 'God is with us.' Before this child was weaned, there would be deliverance from these menacing kings and a 'Righteous Remnant' would remain, through whom God would ensure that His will would be accomplished.

Centuries later, God spoke to another man, Joseph who was in a personal, not a political crisis. He was engaged but not married to Mary, who was pregnant. Joseph knew that he was not the father of the child, but as a good man he considered ending the agreement quietly before two witnesses so as not to involve Mary and her family in prolonged legal proceedings, but when God told him not to be afraid to marry Mary, he obeyed, despite the risk of the certain backlash.

Mary and Joseph heard God's word, received it, and enabled that Word to become visible, available, approachable and accessible to the world. As Archbishop Michael Ramsey is believed to have said, "God is Christlike, and in him there is no un-Christlikeness at all."

Although St Paul does not mention Joseph in his epistles, both of them share in the mission of protecting God's truth revealed in, and through Jesus, the descendent of David who had been promised that his kingdom would live for ever.

In the days before Christmas the words sung before the Gospel at Mass and the Magnificat at Evensong are known as the seven great O's. They are attributes of Jesus the Messiah and they are, O Wisdom, O Lord, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Dayspring from on High, O King of the Nations and O Emmanuel.

These attributes describe the one whose birth we are again about to celebrate. As we prepare for this event, who do we identify with? Is it Ahaz or Joseph? Ahaz was happy to acknowledge God's existence and was prepared to worship Him, but he didn't want Him interfering with his decision-making processes. For Ahaz, God should only act when we invite or tell Him to do so and come up with the answer we want.

Joseph was willing to obey God's will despite any personal cost, inconvenience and shame he might incur at the hand of his fellow Jews. Ahaz was told to ask for a sign of assurance from God and Joseph was told in a dream that God was with him. Ahaz refused, but Joseph embraced God's promise that He is with us. THE sign of God's presence with us is Jesus. He is the visible image of the invisible God. He is the greatest Sacrament, the only Way to the Father.

If you won't like the answer, don't ask the question. Ahaz didn't ask the question and ignored the answer he received. Joseph didn't ask the question but accepted God's answer. As we approach Christmas, are we willing to ask this question of God, "What do you want of me?" More importantly, are we willing to accept his answer whatever the personal cost might be?

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Dec 21st, 2025