

Advent 4A

Today's first and second readings pre-announce the good news of Christmas. First, we have Isaiah's prophecy: "the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she shall call Emmanuel, a name which means God is with us." And then we have the beginning of the Letter to the Romans, where St Paul talks about "the Son of God, who according to the human nature he took, was a descendant of David."

Paul, like us, can look back and see God's promises fulfilled in the person of Jesus. But St Joseph, the protagonist of our Gospel reading, didn't have that privilege. When the good news of Christmas was announced to him by the angel, it hadn't happened yet. The Virgin Birth, the coming of the Saviour - all Joseph had to go on was the word of an angel, spoken to him in a dream.

You might think it would be easy to believe anything if an angel came and told you. But no: an angel also appeared to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, and he didn't believe, with the result that he was struck dumb until the angel's word came true.

If it was difficult for Zechariah, it was even more difficult for Joseph. "She has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit" - really? Has that ever happened before? Is that even possible? It only seems so to us *after* the event. Joseph didn't have the benefit of knowing what we know. To him it must have seemed like wishful thinking or his mind playing tricks on him.

Except it didn't seem that way to Joseph. When Joseph woke up, we're told, he did what the angel told him to do. And that clearly implies he believed what the angel had said. He didn't hesitate, he didn't wait for proof. He welcomed the good news of Christmas and allowed it to change his life.

I think there is a human tendency to believe bad news more readily than good. And that isn't a silly thing to do. The problem is that, when it comes to the things of God, that attitude really doesn't serve us well. Our bias towards bad news really puts a limit on what we think God can do.

If we turn back to that first reading from Isaiah, we see a perfect illustration of this. Isaiah invites King Ahaz to ask the Lord for a sign. What does the King reply? "No. I will not put the Lord to the test." It sounds like a pious reply, very humble, but underneath it there's a refusal to let God be good. And that's the same as refusing to let God be God, to act as He wishes rather than as we, with our innate pessimism, expect him to. For King Ahaz, God's offer seems too good to be true. And that's precisely what irritates Isaiah: "Listen, O House of David, are you not satisfied with trying the patience of men without trying the patience of my God too?"

In St Joseph, the House of David finally responds to God in the way that he desires. Joseph, unlike his ancestor Ahaz, is fully open to God's initiative. He's willing to be surprised and caught off-guard by God's unexpected goodness. He's willing to change his preconceptions and his plans based on God's word. He doesn't try God's patience with false humility and low expectations. Instead, he accepts the good news as such, and responds to it without any delay.

In this way, Joseph becomes a fantastic model of faith for us. One of the great dangers for us, in our life of faith, is that tendency to be sceptical of good news. On one hand, it's true, we

shouldn't be credulous, easy prey to those who would manipulate us. But on the other hand, when it comes to God, we must be willing to have our expectations constantly challenged and overturned. We must be willing to be surprised, even shocked, by his goodness.