First Reading : Isaiah 7: 10–14

This week's passage from Isaiah dates from eight centuries before the birth of Jesus. Its context concerns the kingdoms of Israel (also known as Ephraim) and their ally Syria, which have tried to encourage King Ahaz of Judah to join them. Ahaz has refused, and instead sought an alliance with Assyria, events described in the second book of Kings (2 Kings 16: 5–9). Ahaz is now afraid.

Isaiah advises him to trust in God (Isaiah 7: 4–6) and to ask for a sign. When Ahaz refuses, Isaiah himself gives him a sign from the Lord. This does not come from the depths of Sheol, the place where the dead reside; instead, the sign is a maiden who is with child.

Much has been written by biblical commentators as to the identity of this maiden and her status. The English Standard Version translation which we read today and the Greek and Latin translations of the Scriptures use the word 'virgin', but it seems that the original Hebrew word simply meant a young girl of marriageable age. Some think that she might be the wife of Ahaz; others the wife of Isaiah; or perhaps she was simply an unknown girl whose name has been lost.

However, Christians from the time of Matthew's Gospel have understood these verses as Messianic prophecies referring to Mary and the child Jesus. Leaving aside the power struggle between nations, God will come to earth in lowly circumstances and will live with us.

'Through this icon, let us contemplate the Mystery of the Incarnation'

This is one of the best known passages in the book of Isaiah and is quoted directly by Matthew in this week's Gospel.

Icon by Suzanne Kent (d.2018) of the Emmanuel Community, USA for Domus Emmanuel, Paris (https://emmanuel.info/en)

Gospel Matthew 1: 18–24

A Gospel for the Jews

Matthew recounts the Messiah's birth not by focusing on Mary and her 'yes' to God (as does Luke), but by focusing on Jesus himself.

Matthew is a Jew, writing for Jews who have become followers of Jesus and are now coming under pressure to abandon their faith. He wants to encourage them by demonstrating that Jesus is truly the one who has come to fulfil the prophecies of the Old Testament.

The significance of names

'*Jesus*': The Greek for 'Yahweh helps', which was also interpreted as 'Yahweh saves'. In first-century Judaism it represents the Hebrew name Joshua.

The 'Angel of the Lord': In the Old Testament this was a common designation for God in communication with a human being, sometimes in dreams.

'*Joseph, Son of David*': This is the name used by the angel when he tells Joseph that he need not fear to take Mary as his wife, since she has conceived by the Holy Spirit. It thus echoes the prophecy 'Hear then, O house of David ...' (Isaiah 7: 13, 14: this week's First Reading; see opposite.)

Emmanuel, God-is-with-us: This is not an ordinary name, but a 'throne name': a name taken by rulers giving the theme of their reign. Matthew begins and ends his Gospel with this theme, recalling it in the last line when the risen Christ appears in Galilee: 'And behold, I am with you always; yes, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28: 20).

Jewish Law and tradition

In Judea, betrothal included the right of co-habitation. In Jewish Law, if a girl could not show evidence of virginity, she could be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 22: 20).

The Jews believed that the Holy Spirit was the one who brought God's truth to men and women, and enabled them to recognise that truth when they saw it. They especially connected the Spirit of God with the work of creation. Joseph was familiar with all of these things and responded in faith.

Divine intervention in the birth of God's chosen was a tradition in Israel's faith, as for example in the conception and births of Isaac, Jacob and Samuel (Genesis 18: 11–14, and 25: 21; also 1 Samuel 1: 4–20).