

Today is the 4th Sunday of Advent - the last Sunday prior to the feast of Christmas. We are at the threshold of Christmas. The birth of Jesus is now imminent. In a few days' time we will be celebrating the memory of that great event. Throughout Advent, we have heard of God's promise to send a Liberator - a Savior into the world; today, we catch a glimpse of how that is to be accomplished and to some extent, we can associate with the greatest joy of the Blessed Virgin Mary who awaited the coming of Baby Jesus into the world.

Today's Gospel gives us one of three occasions when an angel appears to Joseph in a dream. In each instance, the angel calls Joseph to action and Joseph obeys. Joseph doesn't have a speaking part. In this first instance, the angel commands Joseph to take Mary as his wife. The angel always begins by saying, "Joseph, son of David," alerting us to Joseph's lineage. It is through Joseph that Jesus will be of the house and lineage of David. Joseph was faced with the biggest crisis any man can ever face. His fiancé is found pregnant before they lived together. It may not a problem in today's society, but for Jewish Society it was a big problem.

In order to understand this problem, we have to understand the Jewish marriage customs at that time which are still practiced in many traditional societies in the east including India. Marriages are arranged by parents or relatives. In most cases the bride and groom never see each other until the wedding day. Jewish marriage started with an engagement arranged by parents. Just prior to marriage, couples began a year-long engagement period very much like marriage except for living together. It was binding and could be terminated only by death or divorce. If a spouse of someone dies even before marriage, such a person was considered to be a widow or widower. Joseph found that Mary was pregnant without his knowledge. Now, the law required that Mary be stoned to death, because she would have been considered an unfaithful wife, and the baby would have been stoned to death with her.

Since Joseph was a just man of great mercy, he resolved to divorce Mary quietly so that he might not cause her unnecessary pain. And then in a dream he learned that the Child had been conceived by the Holy Spirit, and that he himself was to be the foster-father of the Christ, claiming the Child by naming Him, and then rearing Him. Joseph, through trust and Faith in God, accepted his mission as the foster-father of the Son of God.

In today's first reading we heard about king Ahaz who also faced a big problem of different kind. And God promised to me through the prophet about virgin birth. We may be wondering why we get readings couple a king Ahaz and Joseph. Because of the stark contrast between the two men, each faced with a difficult situation.

When faced with attack by enemies, instead of relying in God, king Ahaz relied on pagan Assyrian king for protection and installed an altar for pagan God and sacrificed his first-born son on this altar. Then prophet Isiah tells him that God will give him a sign "Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel."

So, we can see the clear contrast between Ahaz and Joseph. Ahaz, relied on his own wits and schemes. Joseph relied on God alone and trusted in Him absolutely. Ahaz sacrificed his own son to appease the Assyrians and showed no mercy. Joseph spent his life in protecting his foster-son. And so, we see Joseph, in sharp contrast to Ahaz in the background, as the just and righteous man that he is.

Just like king Ahaz and Joseph, we all are faced with challenges and crisis in lives. They could be financial, could be health problems, could be relationship, could be job related or any other. How do we deal with such challenges in life? Just like king Ahaz do we try to find our own ways and means or just like Joseph do we trust in God and obey his plans directions.