

Advent 4

Isaiah 7.10-16;

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, ¹¹ "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights." ¹² But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test."

¹³ Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you^[a] a sign: The virgin^[b] will conceive and give birth to a son, and^[c] will call him Immanuel.^[d] ¹⁵ He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, ¹⁶ for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

Matthew 1.18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about^[a]: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet^[b] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^[c] because he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"^[d] (which means "God with us").

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

I looked up the meaning of the name Mary, on the grounds that Biblical names usually say something important about the person's character or their role. Mary is our version of the Greek Maria, which is really the Hebrew Miriam (like Moses' sister). And the meaning? So far, I've found 'drop of the sea', 'beloved', 'bitter', or rebellion. That sounds like a pretty broad field of meaning, doesn't it? But I can see how our Mary could be beloved by God, because to be the mother of Jesus was a special honour. And I can see, in a way, how she could be bitter — because she bore the bitter weight of knowing that her great son would suffer, and she too. And I can see the rebellion too. One of my favourite hymns is about the magnificat — Mary's song — and it begins 'sing we a song of high revolt'. It talks about the topsy turvy themes in Mary's song — how the hungry will be fed, but the rich sent away empty. The rebellion in Mary, and in God, is not a rebellion against law, or goodness, but against the way things have been, the inherited patterns that we think are right and good because they are what we've always had, in favour of a radically different pattern, based on love, and a law that cares for the last, the least and the lost.

The thought of Mary as part of the rebellion doesn't fit our imagination, does it? Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, lying in a manger besides the meeker, milder Mary — still pristine in our Christmas card imagination.

That sense of rebellion goes right back to early Isaiah, which is smattered with telling hope of new king being born — a shoot from the stump of Jesse, or, quoted here, a virgin giving birth and naming him Immanuel — God with us — God is on our side! And this is a sign that the ruling power will be deposed. It was true in Isaiah's day when Ahaz soon lost the throne, and

it turns out to be true of Herod the Great, who died soon after Jesus was born. Isaiah's prophecies had a snowballing element to them — promising more than the limited meaning they were first heard as having.

In Isaiah's day the rebellion was that of a little country against brutish, barbaric neighbours, Assyria and Babylon. In Jesus's day the rebellion was again sin itself, but of course that was personified in the Roman rule.

We live in a world in which a certain degree of self orientation is pretty much normal or expected. As kids grow up we want them to dream of what they want to do in life, to maximise their potential, to get the most out of life. People have 'bucket lists' (a twenty-first century phenomenon) of the things they want to achieve or experience before they die.

Mary didn't have a bucket list. She didn't have a list of things she wanted for herself. But when God came calling she gave her body and the rest of her life to the cause, the rebellion, and played an extraordinary part, fulfilling, in the process, Isaiah's words from 700 years before.

Amen.

SDG.