

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT; Cycle – A; Dec. 18th 2022
Isaiah 7: 10-14; Romans 1: 1-7; Matthew 1: 18-24

Dear Sisters & Brothers,

As we are getting closer to the Christmas celebrations, the readings also draw our attention to all the aspects of the great mystery of Incarnation, including the struggles and crisis attached to it. Thanks to the efforts of the Evangelists Matthew and Luke we have a full account of the birth of Jesus or the infancy narrative. If we go through the accounts of both we know that they vary from each other in considerable ways. No doubt we appreciate the infancy narrative of Luke for its details and clarity. At the same time we cannot conclude that one account is more perfect and truthful than the other. Rather it is better to say that they complement and supplement each other. For instance, there are certain facts which Matthew mentions in the infancy narrative are not found in Luke and vice versa. The reason for this difference is that both these authors were writing their gospels to a particular community; Matthew to the Jewish converts and Luke to the gentile converts. They chose the facts which were useful to their respective communities.

Now let us see the facts which are exclusive to Matthew and that of Luke. Matthew begins his gospel with the long genealogy of Jesus to show that Jesus was the descendent of David through lineage of Joseph. Thus the prophecy about *Jesus that he would be the Son of David was fulfilled*. After briefly mentioning about the annunciation of Mary in one verse, Matthew goes to elaborate the crisis of Joseph who found his future wife pregnant. After the birth of Jesus the first outsiders who visited Jesus were the magi, the non-Jews. Then he gives the accounts of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt; the massacre of the innocent children and the return of the Holy Family back to Nazareth. With such brief account Matthew's narration is over.

Whereas Luke begins his gospel with the detailed account of the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah. Then he narrates the annunciation in great details and in a dramatic way. **In Luke the canticles of Zechariah and Mary are very famous and they are used in the Church's official prayers.** According to Luke the first visitors to the Holy Family were the shepherds of the area, not the magi. Only Luke gives the account of the circumcision and the presentation of Jesus in the Temple and the appearance of the great Prophet Simeon and Prophetess Anna. His infancy narrative goes up to the loss of Jesus in the Temple at the age of twelve. Luke too gives the genealogy of Jesus in different order, starting from Joseph up to Adam; whereas Matthew begins with Abraham and comes down to Joseph.

The infancy narrative of Matthew seems to be more **of Joseph oriented**; whereas Luke is **more of Mary oriented**. As a Jew, for Matthew the critical situation of Joseph was important and it should be resolved. But as a gentile, Luke doesn't seem to be much worried about Joseph and his crisis. We get the impression from Luke that Joseph simply accepted Mary who became pregnant outside of their marital union. For a Jew this was unacceptable to see the betrothed woman getting pregnant before the official marriage. Here Matthew is more human and logical to show us the natural worry of Joseph. As the normal procedure, Joseph could have filed a case against Mary in the Jewish Sanhedrin and got her stoned to death. But Matthew says that Joseph was a righteous man; so he didn't want to make a big issue out of this. Hence he decided to leave her quietly. Here comes the interference of the angel who met Joseph only in a dream and asked him to accept Mary immediately. It is interesting to notice that the angel appeared to Joseph two more times **but only in the dream**. Both Zechariah and Mary had the privilege to see the angel directly. But in all three situations Joseph believed what he saw in the dream and heard. None of us will venture to act on the dream we have. Zechariah totally doubted the words of the angel and Mary had hesitation and concerns. **But Joseph never questioned or doubted the angel's words.**

Joseph is a good role model for all the Christians. In our journey of faith there are moments of crisis and doubts. Perhaps, we had the moments when we felt like leaving our faith and going away. Very often we seek some signs from God and He doesn't even send us an angel in our dream. But His assurance of help is always with us. To Joseph the angel said, **"Joseph do not be afraid to take Mary your wife in to your home."** To Mary also the angel says, **"Do not be afraid."** **This phrase 'Do not be afraid' or 'Fear not' occurs 365 times in the entire Bible.** On a few occasions Jesus uses the same phrase to comfort and strengthen his apostles, *"Do not be afraid, it is I."* When we think that we can no more handle the situations, the words of Jesus come to us, **'Do not be afraid I am with you.'** *Of course, they may not be coming through angel Gabriel or Raphael rather they may be coming through our friends, neighbors, family members and priests and they will be the angels who help us at times.* In order to recognize this comforting voice we need the humility, faith and trust in the Lord. Joseph never doubted the words of the angel even for a moment; as a result he became righteous before God. Let this phrase, **'Do not be afraid,'** always ring in our ears.