

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we enter into a new phase of Advent. Up to this point, we have been focused on the second coming of Christ. This is why we heard readings that put before us the big vision of the Old Testament prophets who were waiting patiently for the end time and the coming of the Messiah. It was a vision of a world transformed where creatures who were natural enemies would live in peace together, where there would be no famine or hunger and where God would provide abundant food. It was a vision of people returning to where they belonged and living without fear. This was a big, bold vision. And it was a vision that reflected God's promise through the generations going right back to Abraham.

The focus changes today to something more immediate. We hear the announcement of the birth of Jesus. The central character in today's gospel from St Matthew is Joseph. The scene is an annunciation made to Joseph by an angel. Joseph would have been familiar with the future the prophets pointed to. That future was about to unfold very concretely in his life and in the world. We know the story well, of course. In a dream Joseph is told that his fiancée, Mary, is pregnant and he decides to divorce her informally. But the angel of the Lord intervenes and tells him that Mary has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. The angel goes on to tell Joseph what name he is to give to the child. The child is to be called Jesus because he is the one who will save his people from their sins. We can recognise this as the fulfilment of what the prophets had longed for. The story ends with Joseph doing what the angel told him and taking Mary to his home.

Sometimes we know these stories so well that we don't take enough time to ponder their depth of meaning. I think there are two things that we should notice and ponder in this gospel scene. The first is about the faith that Joseph had. The only way he could have made sense of what the angel was telling him in the dream was if he trusted God's word spoken through the angel. The message from the prophets that we have been hearing on these Sundays of Advent might have helped him a little, but I think he would have had to put aside his normal way of thinking things through. It was only with the ears of faith that he would be able to hear what was being asked of him and do it. This reminds me of a saying of Jesus later in the gospel when he rebukes Peter telling him that God's way of dealing with the world is different to the way that we humans normally deal with the world. Today we see that for Joseph it wasn't about having answers to things. It is probably significant that this revelation from God happened in a dream

because a dream does not normally answer all our big questions; often a lot of things remain a mystery. Often, the dream helps you live with the mystery and even embrace it.

This leads to the second thing we can notice and ponder in the Joseph story we have heard today. He was drawn into the mystery of God's entering into the world in a unique way when Jesus was born. God had chosen him and we see that God also trusts him. Joseph is entrusted with a special task. He will now have to prepare the world to welcome Jesus. He will have to look out for this child who will save his people.

I heard it said once that the way to recognise what was happening in Joseph's dream is to consider that he wasn't sleeping while he was dreaming. Rather, he was praying. I find this a helpful insight. It reminds us that we all pray in different ways and different contexts. As well as formal ways of praying, there are also informal ways. Perhaps in our dreams God touches us. Perhaps when we are going for a gentle walk and allowing ourselves to daydream, something will become clear to us about what we should do. Now, these situations don't happen all the time, and we can't make them happen. The scene of Joseph in today's gospel reminds us that the encounter with God may take place in unexpected and unscripted ways.

It is important to recognise that God entered into Joseph's life at the very time and place where he faced problems and had to make a decision. This was to turn out to be the most important decision of his life. God took the initiative with Joseph, but Joseph was ready to embrace the path that God was opening up for him. In an important way, Joseph anticipates what we are all called to, namely, to have faith in Jesus. This is faith as trust – trust that Jesus will change our lives and transform the world.

Let's use these last few days of Advent to get ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Let's remember that he is the one the prophets longed to see.