

Closing Prayer

Eternal God,
in the psalms of David,
in the words of the prophets,
in the dream of Joseph
your promise is spoken.
At last, in the womb of the Virgin Mary,
your Word takes flesh.

Teach us to welcome Jesus, the promised Emmanuel,
and to preach the good news of his coming,
that every age may know him
as the source of redemption and grace.

Grant this through him whose coming is certain,
whose day draws near:
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.

Opening prayers · Advent 4, Year A³

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³ *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.*

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Sunday between 18 and 24 December inclusive

Principal Service readings

Isaiah 7.10-16	A sign: the virgin will conceive and bear a son
Psalms 80.1-8, [18-20]	Prayer for restoration to God, the Shepherd of Israel
Romans 1.1-7	Paul introduces himself; Jesus Christ, son of David, son of God
Matthew 1.18-25	Joseph's dream of the birth of Jesus (quoting Isaiah)

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The birth of Jesus

¹⁸The birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Matthew 1.18-25 NRSV¹

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Comments and Questions

The story of the birth of Jesus can be read as a continuation of the genealogy (1.1-17). Whereas the genealogy established Jesus as the Son of David through his legal father, Joseph, the story of his birth explains how it came to be that Jesus the Son of God, conceived through the Holy Spirit, was David's Son.

Jews of Jesus' time understood marriage as a civil contract rather than as a religious ritual or 'sacrament'. Engagement or betrothal was taken very seriously and acknowledged to have legal consequences (see Deuteronomy 20.7; 2.23-27). The usual case seems to have been arranged through elders of the family. By today's standards the couple would be considered young, with a minimum ages set at thirteen for the male and twelve for the female. Apart from the prohibited degrees of kinship (see Leviticus 18). It was normal to marry within tribes or families.

The betrothal took place at the home of the father of the bride (where the bride would stay after the betrothal). At the betrothal ceremony the husband would present the wife (and her father) with the marriage contract and the bride-price. One or several years might elapse between the betrothal and the marriage ceremony. The marriage ceremony consisted of a transfer of the bride from her father's home to that of the groom (or his father's). In Matthew 1.18-25 the couple seem to be between the betrothal and marriage stages.

When Mary was found to be pregnant Joseph had a choice, to demand that the procedure outlined in Deuteronomy 22.23-27 be carried out (if having sexual relations with another man, the, either death for both parties, if in the city, or, if in the countryside, death for the man), or to go through the usual divorce procedure. Joseph's choice to divorce Mary 'quietly (1.19) implies that he didn't want to subject her to public disgrace or violence.

However, Joseph's choice is cut into by a short communication to him through a dream (1.20-21). The messenger is called an 'angel of the Lord' (1.20), a figure well known from the Old Testament.² The angel often

² Genesis 16.7-13; 22.11; Exodus 3.2; Numbers 22.22; Judges 6.11-24; 13.3; Zechariah 1.11; 3.1. The Hebrew term *mala'k* is translated in Greek to *angelos*, and to English as

makes known the will of God. Dreams feature in the life of Jacob (Genesis 28.10-17) and Joseph (Genesis 37.5-11), and in the Book of Daniel the dreams of pagan kings are interpreted.

The angel announces to Joseph Jesus' birth, name, and identity (1.20-21). Why is the central character in Matthew's account Joseph, rather than Mary?

Quotations

1

Knowing by experience St. Joseph's astonishing influence with God, I would wish to persuade everyone to honor him with particular devotion. I have always seen those who honored him in a special manner make progress in virtue, for this heavenly protector favors in a striking manner the spiritual advancement of souls who commend themselves to him.

St Teresa of Ávila, 1515–1582

2

I have a great love for St. Joseph, because he is a man of silence and strength. On my table, I have an image of St. Joseph sleeping. Even when he is asleep, he is taking care of the Church! Yes! We know that he can do that. So when I have a problem, a difficulty, I write a little note and I put it underneath St. Joseph, so that he can dream about it! In other words, I tell him: 'Pray for this problem!'

Pope Francis, 1936–

Related topics

For further study:

Advent; eschatology; kingdom of God; discipleship; repentance and reconciliation; Christ's coming; future, past, present; Son of Man; parousia

'messenger'.