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## Fourth Sunday of Advent - 18 December 2022

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# 18 December 2022

## Fourth Sunday of Advent

Reflection by Angela Marquis

### Introduction

Throughout Advent, we have prepared our hearts and minds for the birth of Christ. Like Joseph, we may be surprised to find that Jesus comes to us in an unexpected way this Christmas. Joseph accepts and acts upon the vision of his dream – he inspires our own faith and acceptance of God’s will.

### Penitential Act

The Advent Wreath Responsory (see ‘Advent Wreath Year A’) often replaces the Penitential Act and therefore leads into the Opening Prayer.

Or use one of the *Roman Missal* texts or this optional litany form:

Lord Jesus, you became fully human to save us all. Lord have mercy.

You are the one whom the prophets foretold. Christ have mercy.

You bring salvation to all nations. Lord have mercy.

### Collect

*The oration*

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord,  
your grace into our hearts,  
that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son  
was made known by the message of an Angel,  
may by his Passion and Cross  
be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
God, for ever and ever.

Our opening prayer this Sunday is steeped in theology and piety. Theologically it recounts the salvific deeds of Christ: incarnation, passion and death, resurrection. It seeks that we be brought into the glory of Christ’s resurrection through the crucifixion. The Advent focus is on the incarnation, with the reference to the message of the Angel offering an appreciation of the biblical narratives of the birth of

the child. The depths of the taking flesh are seen in the passion and cross, while the supremacy of grace over death comes forth in the resurrection.

The prayer, also the concluding collect for the thrice daily Angelus, evokes devotion to Mary. The Angelus reflects God's work of incarnation with a dialogue that rings with Mary's fiat and its outcome in the Word becoming flesh. The private message of Gabriel to Mary opens onto the public pronouncement of the angels to the shepherds, and ultimately made known to us.

The prayer can be difficult to proclaim precisely because it is so well known to many of the faithful. Yet it evinces that potent seasonal mixture of theology, piety, devotion to Mary and the Christ-child, and nativity stories. Most importantly, it closely connects the Cross to the incarnation, and sets them within the triumph of the resurrection.

### **Acknowledgement**

The discussion of the collect, slightly adapted, was composed by Gerard Moore for the Canadian liturgical journal *Celebrate!* (Novalis Press). Our thanks to them for permission to reuse the material.

## **First Reading**

### **Isaiah 7:10-14**

Refusing to put the Lord to the test, Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign. Isaiah prophesies to the House of David, the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son.

## **Responsorial Psalm**

### **Psalm 23:1-6. R. cf vv. 7. 10**

*Let the Lord enter: he is a king of glory*

The psalmist reminds us of the grandeur of the earth and its people. Only the pure of heart shall climb God's mountains and such a person will receive God's blessings.

## **Second Reading**

### **Romans 1:1-7**

Paul introduces Christ to the Romans. He proclaims Jesus' ancestry from David and professes the spirit of holiness within the Son of God who has sent Paul to them.

## **Gospel Reading**

### **Matthew 1:18-24**

Along with Jacob's favoured son, Joseph acknowledges and interprets his dreams. He believes in the prophecy of Isaiah, proclaimed by Gabriel, and takes Mary home.

## **Reflection**

There are two stained glass windows that hang above the choir at St Joseph's Church in Hobart, Tasmania. Each illustrates a series of images that capture the life of St Joseph. The first window portrays four panels: the nuptials of Joseph and Mary,

the Angel Gabriel revealed to Joseph in a dream, the birth of Jesus, and Simeon's prophecy at Jesus' Presentation in the temple. A further four scenes are portrayed in the second window: the Holy Family's escape from Herod into Egypt, Jesus, as a twelve-year-old, thought lost, yet found in the Temple, Joseph and Jesus at work together, and finally, the death of Joseph, with Mary and Jesus by his side.

The windows are intricate in design and capture the life of a man that we know little about. Indeed, three of the stories portrayed above are not specifically told by the Gospel. Instead, they have been pieced together from a yearning to understand the childhood of the Son of God and his relationship with his parents. It is a very human desire to fill in the gaps – to ascribe meaning to situations that we value. Oral traditions passed down through generations have a beautifully significant way of capturing the experiences of our elders and ancestors, and those that have been written down have been kept alive. Often, however, stories that are told for cultural, religious or political reasons bind us with truths that are difficult to extricate ourselves from.

So, why is the story of Joseph so important?

There is an allusion only to the marriage of Mary and Joseph in today's text—perhaps the interpretation has been lost in translation because the course of events is extremely unclear. Mary is betrothed, or engaged, to Joseph. Before they lived together (v.18), Joseph finds she is pregnant and decides to divorce her (v.19) The Angel Gabriel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him that all is well, Mary has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit (v.20). When Joseph wakes up, he takes his wife to his home (v.24). Married or engaged, divorced or broken engagement, before or after. The story in its detail does not make complete sense, however, the point is not in the detail, but rather to show one thing: Joseph was a man of honour.

While it is hard to imagine the societal norms of first century Israel, it is clear from the many stories of the condemned, widowed and unclean, the divorced or bleeding women, that life is challenging. Had Mary been discovered unwed and pregnant, her life would have taken a very different course. The story of Joseph's ability to reassess and reconsider gives us an insight into his person – Joseph is not power hungry, nor concerned with the opinions of others. He risks shame and judgement of his own people by making this decision. It is both noble and worthy. Joseph will not forget Mary.

What does the Gospel actually say of Joseph? According to Matthew's genealogy, Joseph is a descendant of David (Matthew 1:1-17). This lineage is important as the Messiah was prophesied to be born of David's line. The story of Joseph therefore becomes a fulfillment text: Joseph dreams of the prophecy (Isaiah 7:14), and Jesus Christ is indeed born of a maiden.

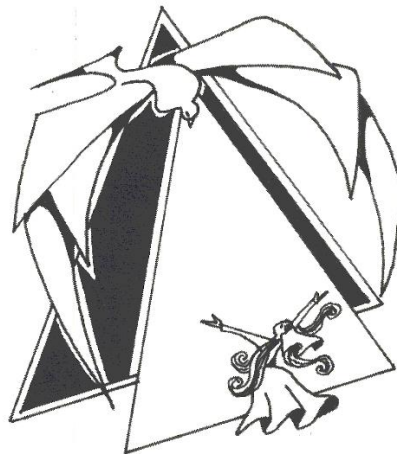
Joseph is further warned in a dream to uproot his family and escape into Egypt. Herod realises the Magi have eluded him and, in his fury, has all children under two killed. Here, the connection with Exodus 12 is clear – the Messiah has been 'passed over' as were his descendants on the night of their escape from Egypt. A further dream alerts Joseph to the fact that Herod has died and it is safe for him to return home.

Joseph is not given a voice in the story of Jesus' Presentation in the Temple. He, along with Mary, are amazed (Luke 2:33), yet remain silent witnesses to Simeon's prophecy. When Jesus is thought lost on the way home from Jerusalem, only to be found in his Father's house (Luke 2:49), Joseph is again a silent bystander. He accepts the presence of God, and acts silently, yet with honour. Throughout the scriptures, God provides insight through dreams. What can Joseph teach us about listening to and acting upon the visions revealed to us? Joseph trusts his intuition. He does not speak – he acts.

Joseph's story is passed down, recalled, elaborated upon, and honoured. His narrative is unusual, for biblical men are usually given more agency, while women are so often the silent or nameless ones. Later, in Matthew's Gospel such a woman is moved to anoint Jesus with expensive oil. Her act is condemned as wasteful by those present yet Jesus honours her. This might this be read as a parallel to the story of Joseph. Today, a prophecy is delivered through a dream to Joseph who acts – Jesus' birth follows. In Matthew 26, a woman also acts. Jesus affirms that her deed will always be remembered, for she has anointed him for his burial. In both stories, an honourable silent act is proclaimed.

The Gospel comes to us from a particular time and place. Beautiful artistic interpretations, such as the windows described above, along with the many sculptures, paintings and hymns gifted to us over the past 2000 years, often bring these stories even closer. Whereas we might sit with the words of a text and ponder them in our hearts, there is an immediacy of experience as we reflect upon visual art and music—the interpretative lens is on full display.

Let us sit with Joseph today, acknowledging his support and care for Mary and Jesus, and recall all men who have acted silently with honour, who recognise women as created equally in the image of God. There are many 'Josephs' in our Church and world who have resisted the cultural norms, religious authority, or outdated rules that have segregated women from men and for you all, I give thanks.



*Mary was found to be  
with child through the  
Holy Spirit.*

# Prayer of the Faithful

## Introduction

As we prepare to celebrate the Nativity of Jesus, let us offer our prayers and needs to God through the power of the Holy Spirit in Christ.

## Petitions

We pray for the Church, that we may be united as one in our words and deeds and therefore be a visible sign to the world of your love.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for the leaders of our world that they respect all religious traditions and allow all Christians freedom to celebrate the coming of Christ.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those at a crossroad in their life or faced with difficult decisions, give them the gift of discernment to act according to your Will.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for families, particularly as they celebrate the coming of your Son at Christmas. May they have a sense of togetherness and hope especially if these are difficult times for them.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those experiencing discrimination and hardship. May our actions support them in their need and help them to know that when Christ comes again justice will reign through all creation. *(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those from our community who travel at Christmas time. May they reach their destinations safely and share the love and joy of Christmas with their families and friends.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those who do not know Christ that they will come to know his presence in the world through the love that Christians show for all people that they meet.

*(Pause)* Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

## Conclusion

Father, you sent your Son and the Holy Spirit to change our world. Hear this prayer for those in need as we work to unite your earthly family. We make our prayer through the power of the Spirit, in the name of your Son, Jesus.

**Amen.**

**Music selections by Alessio Loiacono and Chris deSilva**

Title	AOV1	AOV2	AOVK	GA	CWB	CWBII	S&S2
Come O long expected Jesus					657	232	
Emmanuel							290
Holy Virgin, by God's decree					714	410	
Immaculate Mary, we praise God in you				549	723	416	
Immanuel							292
Joy to you, O Virgin Mary					729		
Magnificat (Tell out my soul)				550		213	
My soul rejoices				250		212	
O come, divine Messiah!						240	
O come, O come, Emmanuel	174			285	763	242	
O Emmanuel			52			241	
O holy Mary	141					413	
Open the heavens		163				243	
Saviour of the nations, come						246	
Take comfort, God's people					813		
The Angel Gabriel from heaven came					815		
You heavens, sprinkle dew (Rorate caeli)						254	

## Psalms Selected by Chris deSilva and Angela McCarthy

Psalm 23: *Let the Lord enter; he is king of glory.*

	CWB	JOBA	LPA
Psalm 23	181	pg. 14	pg. 16

## Music selections by Michael Mangan

**O Emmanuel** (TT/SYJ/CWBII) [Gathering, Communion, Recessional]  
**Come, Lord Jesus, come** CH & V2 (SYJ/CWBII) [Lighting Advent Wreath]  
**To you, O Lord** (LCC) *Ps 24/25 (Chn's Lectionary)* [Seasonal Psalm]  
**Advent alleluia** (*Vs 4*) (TT) [Gospel Acclamation]  
**Mary said yes** (TT) [CHILDREN: Gathering, Recessional]  
**We come, we come** (TWB) [Communion – esp V3]  
**Waiting for the child** (TT/SYJ) [Non-Scriptural Reflection]