

Advent 4A 2019 SSP

Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; St. Matthew 1:18-25

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

We are near the end of the Advent season, on the brink of the Church's official celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. The old 1928 Book of Common Prayer put the title elegantly: The Nativity of our Lord, or the Birthday of Christ, commonly called Christmas Day.

Let me begin asking if it has occurred to you, as it occurs to me, that it is truly remarkable that we celebrate, as we do, the birthday of a man who was crucified, died, and was buried about 2,000 years ago? It is a question well worth reflection, because it gets at the heart of Christianity.

The reason, of course, is stated in today's reading from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. We heard the very beginning of the epistle, where Paul introduces himself as an apostle to the Church where Saint Peter had gone before. The Apostle says he has been set apart for the gospel of the Son of God who was raised from the dead. In other words, we celebrate Jesus's birthday the way we do because he is alive and blesses us as he has blessed our ancestors in the faith for the two millennia since he was born.

God's Son was conceived by the same power that raised him from the dead – in Paul's words, by the spirit of holiness. In today's Gospel Saint Matthew tells the birth story from the perspective of Saint Joseph. Engaged to Mary, before they came together she was found to be "with child by the Holy Spirit." But that wasn't Joseph's first and natural thought; being a decent and devout man, he resolved quietly to dismiss Mary as his fiancé. Then an angel appeared to him, telling Joseph not to fear; Mary's child was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Saint Luke tells this story from Mary's perspective, and when the angel announced to her that she would become the mother of God's Son, she was troubled by the same first and natural thoughts but from the mother's side: How can this be, since I know not a man? The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and power of the highest shall overshadow thee. So it was that first Mary (as told by Saint Luke) and then Joseph (as told by Saint Matthew) said Yes to God. Joseph's Yes was the first confirmation to Mary of the angel's message, and that God would protect the Holy Family, let circumstances happen as they would.

Just so, the child would grow and his life and ministry would flourish – as well as provoke lethal opposition from the world. Jesus once said to his followers, In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

My dear friends, this child, this man who was indeed God's Son, God's Word made flesh who came to dwell among us and save us from what ails us, is The Good News. We do very well to celebrate his birthday, just as next Easter we do very well to celebrate his resurrection from the dead. Week by week he gives us his body and blood, and do you know, there is a lovely Communion anthem that connects Christ's birthday to his resurrection. You know it, and the choir sings it, the Ave Verum Corpus. "Hail true Body, born of the Virgin Mary, having truly suffered, sacrificed on the cross for mankind, from whose pierced side water and blood flowed: Be for us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in the trial of death. O sweet Jesus, O holy Jesus, O Jesus Son of Mary, have mercy on me. Amen."

So as we prepare to celebrate his Birthday, which is actually a feast which is part of his Resurrection, may our dear Lord Jesus bless and keep us. Be of good cheer, he has overcome the world.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.