

When a group of men from the parish sought my permission to initiate the “Man Up” men’s fellowship and spiritual formation group I suggested that the motto for the group be these words of St. Anselm of Canterbury, the medieval bishop of doctor of the church: “*Fides quorum intellectum*”—**FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING.**

This quote summarizes today’s liturgy of the Fourth Sunday in Advent as well. Two men are contrasted: King Ahaz in the first reading and Joseph, the husband of Mary, in the Gospel in terms of their response to God’s invitation to faith in him and his promise of Emmanuel.

The reading from Isaiah often used on the feasts of Mary because of its promise that a “virgin shall conceive and bear a son” is a later Christian interpretation of this passage. In its original context, 700 years before the birth of Jesus, the birth announcement was made by Isaiah to the wicked king Ahaz as a warning. Facing the danger of invasion, King Ahaz chose to rely on a military alliance negotiated with Assyria to protect him. In the process, he abandoned his fidelity to the faith of the God of the Covenant of his ancestors. Ahaz “piously” refused to ask for a sign because he did not want confirmation that Isaiah was, in fact, speaking for God.

The Gospel reading presents us Joseph and his response in contrast to Ahaz. In Matthew’s recounting of the real-life scandal and the potentially tragic dimensions of Emmanuel’s advent—Mary’s pregnancy outside the confines of marriage, and even more puzzling a conception not by natural means but by the Spirit of God, Joseph confronted unexpected and bad news. Whereas Ahaz opted for salvation through trust in the powers of this world, Joseph like his father in human ancestry and faith, Abraham, entertained an angel and discovered an alternative to his plan to “divorce Mary quietly.” Joseph accepted the risk of faith even though he did not have full understanding. He took to heart the angel’s word: “Do not be afraid.”

Where does this lead us today? What do our readings tell us about Emmanuel and our anticipation and celebration of his presence this week in our Christmas feast? Isaiah reminds us that the coming of Emmanuel will expose our deepest motivations and priorities. Like Ahaz, we will expose ourselves by the type of power we put our faith in and the signs we choose to believe in. Like Isaiah, Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation, *“The Joy of the Gospel”* calls us to an examination of conscience in regard to whom or to what we direct our faith, our trust, our security, in speaking about what he directly labels: “The idolatry of money” and its consequences in our personal and communal life. Ahaz chose to put his faith in what he could see because he was afraid and prideful. In the end his trust in the powers of the world, failed him and his people. Israel became a vassal state of Assyria and eventually, with the Southern Kingdom of Judah, was conquered and taken captive to Babylon; the era of kings, over.

Joseph offers us a model of one whose faith though seeking understanding, is not afraid and risks stepping out in trust to and for God. Joseph risked everything in placing his faith in God’s quiet messages to him. Joseph welcomed Mary and her son, Jesus, Emmanuel and claimed them as his own. As the days, years and events of his vocation as husband and foster-father unfolded, Joseph’s faith would again and again be tested. He would continue to seek understanding, but like Abraham, and the other great men and women of faith, in the end he would risk trust. For his faith, like Abraham, Joseph is held up by the Church as a model of righteousness, as one whose faith is “credited to him as justice”, as the patron of the Universal Church.

As we end our Advent season we are invited to look to the deeper meaning of our pretty Christmas scenes and question ourselves. Do we want to be open to new signs of God’s presence? Are we willing to center our entire lives on Christ and live in the freedom he offers us? Will we, with Joseph, risk the adventure of faith? If our answer is “Yes” the coming and presence of Emmanuel once again will be good news for us and, true to his word, he will remain with us.