

Advent 4 – Whose Will?

(Is 7:10-16 p692; Matt 1;18-end)

Mary's humble obedience to God's will always astound and inspire me. She is an outstanding example to each one of us.

There are two books whose titles have similarly made me sit up and think.

The first was published in celebration of the Queen's 90th birthday. It's title: "The Servant Queen and the King she serves."

The other book by Timothy Keller explores Jesus willingness to face death; as the Son of God, Lord of lords and King of kings sets out willingly to endure the cross. A human journey that began with the immaculate conception, as the Son of God wrapped himself up in a human egg. It's title: "The Obedient Master."

Reflecting on both books and both lives, we are left with the question: If The Queen serves King Jesus, and Jesus serves The Father, then who do I serve?

In his book, Timothy Keller writes "The basic purpose of prayer is not to bend God's will to mine, but to mould my will into his."

I wonder, is this how we pray? Is this how we orient our lives?

What do we mean when we say "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" and give that prayer the most solemn affirmation "For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen."

God acts in human history. He always has done, and He always will do. Sometimes we just don't see it. At other times it is clear and obvious, it is declared before-hand, and we watch it unfold.

Sometimes we view it through the eyes of scepticism; and live in denial. At other times we see miracles happen and rejoice!

Personally I've witnessed too many miracles to deny God's power and willingness to act in human lives.

As we sit here today, with Christmas just around the corner, how do you see the virgin birth of Jesus? Through eyes of scepticism, or through eyes of faith? Is it a quaint myth, like Santa Claus to be indulged with family feasting and the exchange of presents? Or is it the turning point of human history that has given our own lives shape and purpose – a time to celebrate “Immanuel” – God with us? Is it a time for self-indulgence, or a time to rededicate ourselves to the one who dedicated his life to us?

In today's readings we find two people who were wavering, thinking in human terms of the dilemmas they faced. They are Ahaz and Joseph. We also find two people who were unwavering in their willingness to serve God no matter what. They are Isaiah and Mary. Both accounts are historical records. Both are seen through the eyes of faith in God on the one hand, and reliance on human wisdom on the other.

Ahaz was the King of Judea – comprising the only two tribes that remained loyal to King David's line when the ten northern tribes tore themselves away from the United Kingdom and declared independence. Now those northern tribes, allied with Aram had come back to finish the job, by conquering Judea. Ahaz was facing impossible odds, and we read “the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest were shaken by the wind.” What should he do? Seek terms for peace, surrender in the face of defeat? Less than 10 years earlier, the day Ahaz grandfather died,

and his father took to the throne, Isaiah was called to a life of prophecy. He declared God's will to Ahaz, and encouraged Ahaz to mould his will to God's purposes.

Isaiah, speaking God's words, declared of the threatened conquest: "It will not take place; it will not happen." He also warned Ahaz: "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all." This is where our reading picks up. What would you have done?

Ahaz must have been wavering, because through Isaiah, God offered to give Ahaz a sign that his promise would be fulfilled. Ahaz refused to ask, so God declared a sign for Ahaz "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

God also put a timescale on his promise to rescue Judea from this threat. The threat would be lifted before this child reached the age of responsibility, so including the pregnancy that was 14 years or so. Ahaz came to the throne in 735 BC. Isaiah must have prophesied between then and 732 BC when Damascus fell to the Assyrians ending the reign of Pekah the Israelite king who threatened Ahaz. This was probably just after the birth of Isaiah's own son. Then 10 years later Assyria finally conquered Samaria putting an end to both the northern kingdom and Aram. But, despite all this, Ahaz did not "stand firm in his faith". He subjugated Judea to Assyria in return for protection against Syria, even allowing the Assyrian gods to be worshipped in The Temple. His reign came to an end just seven years later.

Do we see this account through Isaiah's eyes of faith? Do we see God at work in human history, rescuing his people from all-comers, working his purposes out? Or do we see it through they

eyes of scepticism? Perhaps we say Isaiah wrote his prophecy in retrospect! But there is a wee problem with this scepticism.

Isaiah's prophecy links the two accounts. Isaiah wasn't around some 730 years later, when the words of his prophecy, like a dormant seed, sprang back to life. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

It was with the eyes of faith that our gospel writer Matthew saw this prophecy reignited in the birth of Jesus.

Once again, as in Isaiah's time, God's people were under the yoke of foreign forces. They were in occupied territory under the might of the Roman Empire. The Jewish leaders were somewhat reluctant, but pragmatic collaborators. Hotheads and Zealots seeking Jewish independence sprang up and were ruthlessly dealt with. The expectation of a Messianic saviour was high. Ahaz situation and God's rescue must have been fuel to the fire of hope, and right in the middle of it was Isaiah's prophecy – the promise of a sign to give hope.

Again, Mathew's account is simply historic, but history seen through the eyes of faith in God's power, purposes and promise.

"Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph." A simple statement. In that culture a pledge was much stronger than our word "engaged". It was more like exchanging contracts on a house purchase – the deal is done, just not yet completed. Just as when buying a house, you don't move in until completion, so when "pledged to be married", you didn't move in either! Matthew

emphasises this with the simple statement “but before they came together.”

Many sceptics, like the infamous Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins would latch onto that word ‘virgin’ and rightly point out it could be translated as ‘young woman’ or ‘betrothed woman’ – not necessarily a virgin at all. With Isaiah’s son that was probably a better translation, since he says he made love to the prophetess. But with Mary’s son, Matthew explicitly rules out this interpretation. Mary was a virgin. Matthew also reinforces that this was an immaculate conception, not once but twice: once as a statement of fact “Before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit”; and secondly as a report in Joseph’s dream “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

I myself have experienced both dreams and visions which I believe to be from God. I was surprised when at one retreat, the dozen or so of us present identified well over twenty different ways in which we believed God had spoken to us. So I have no problem with the clarity of Joseph’s dream or its reality. This is not simply a literary device like ‘voice stage left’ but the record of an event in Joseph’s life, recorded for posterity.

Mary and Joseph faced the reality of the totally unexpected, and at the time utterly inexplicable pregnancy, that points to Isaiah’s prophecy “they will call him Immanuel” which Matthew explains for the non-Jewish reader means “God with us”. Right here, in the very moment of conception, God became present in human form.

For me, belief in the immaculate conception has become easier as our science has progressed. Even in my own lifetime, as humans we have achieved in-vitro fertilisation, we have achieved cloning, we have achieved gene-editing using the CRISPR technology. The more detailed our understanding and ability to intervene in the process of fertilisation the easier it becomes to realise what a synch that would be for God!

God did not just arrive to possess the man Jesus at his baptism, and then leave that man to die on the cross as one early heresy would have us believe. He came at the moment of conception so that every fibre, every cell of Jesus would be infused with God's presence. It wasn't that man became God for a while, but that God became man. Or as John declares most powerfully "The Word became flesh".

Only so could we explain the reaction of Elizabeth as her unborn son John the Baptist leapt in her womb when a pregnant Mary arrived. Only so could we explain the extraordinary happenings around Jesus birth, and the prophetic words of Simeon and Anna in the temple at his consecration. Only so could we explain his wisdom in the temple as a young boy, or John the Baptist's declaration before Jesus was baptised "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

But we get ahead of ourselves.

How did Mary and Joseph react to this reality?

In Luke we read that Mary's first reaction was amazement: "How will this be since I am a virgin?" Here the words "I am a virgin" are a translation not of the word for 'young woman' but of the

statement “since I have not known a man”. No wonder she was puzzled. But the depth of her faith and willingness is overwhelmingly humbling: “I am the Lord’s servant, may your word be fulfilled in me.” What courage, what willingness to mould her own will to God’s will. It reminds me of that book “The servant Queen and the King she serves”.

Joseph struggled a bit more. His initial thoughts were along purely pragmatic lines, drawn from human wisdom, and legal obligation. We read “He did not want to expose her to public disgrace” which could have led to her being stoned for adultery. Instead “he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”

But through a dream, God changed his mind. “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Joseph clearly recognised this dream as God’s intervention, otherwise he would have followed plan A and divorced Mary. But instead he took her home as his wife. What courage, what willingness to mould his own will to God’s will.

And this is the point! Not only to hear from God, however he chooses to speak with us; but also to act upon his will for our lives.

Ahaz largely pursued human wisdom, and compromised with Assyria, even though God’s plans were made clear to him. He viewed God’s promises and plans with scepticism. Despite this, God’s promise “This will not happen” was fulfilled. The threatened invasion evaporated. But so too was God’s warning fulfilled “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.” His reign as king came to a relatively swift end. By contrast...

Mary and Joseph were both willing to see the world through God's eyes, both willing to mould their wills to God's will. They put aside human wisdom and put aside scepticism. They embraced faith that would change their lives. As a result, human history pivoted about this moment of immaculate conception.

In his book "The Obedient Master", Timothy Keller writes "The basic purpose of prayer is not to bend God's will to mine, but to mould my will to his."

Let us pray.

Father God help us to see the world through the eyes of faith. Help us to lay aside our own wilfulness and scepticism. Help us this Christmas to embrace the good news of Immanuel, God with us, in the person of Jesus. Help us to live our lives in your will and for your purposes, through the presence and power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.