

Homily for 4th Sunday of Advent. "Christians live less than Christian"  
Isaiah 7

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, 11 "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."

12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test."

13 Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. 15 He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, 16 for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

Matthew 1: 18 – end

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Our gospel reading came from the beginning of Matthew's account of the life of Jesus, or rather, from just after the start. The reading omitted the actual start which consists of a long list of the legal lineage of Jesus through Joseph. An understandable omission as it is a bit dull to read out, however to Matthew it was the place to start in explaining the ministry of Jesus. Matthew was concerned to show that the heritage of Jesus could be traced back to key Old Testament figures and prophecies.

Traced to David, the greatest King of Israel, probably with these words from 2 Samuel 7 in mind, "The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you... I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom."

And traced to Abraham, the father of the nation, and through him the words of Genesis 12:3, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Matthew's concern in the genealogy, and in his whole account of the life of Jesus, is to show that Jesus is the Messiah long expected from scripture and tradition. Thus he goes on to describe the Virgin Birth, writing,

"All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us."

Matthew is quoting our first reading from Isaiah. When Isaiah was writing he was not predicting the Messiah, that's not what prophesy is about, the things Isaiah wrote concerning a young woman bearing a child had a meaning in his own time, but for Matthew the familiar words of the Old Testament take on a new and deeper meaning seen in the light of Jesus. It turned out the meaning was greater than Isaiah could have imagined, but then God can invest the even smallest matter with infinite meaning that slowly unfolds to our understanding.

Some people worry that Isaiah wrote in Hebrew that 'a young woman' would bear a child, whereas Matthew writes in Greek that a 'virgin' would bear a child. However a young unmarried woman in both Isaiah's and Matthew's time would be expected to be a virgin, they are synonyms, and in any case, remember it is not a prediction, the words had a meaning in Isaiah's time, and in the light of the life of Jesus a deeper meaning was revealed.

Matthew's message is that Jesus is the Messiah, or in Greek, the Christ, the one anointed to bring salvation, but I think we sometimes miss that a strong part of the message is that Jesus is Jewish. He has a Jewish lineage, he is descended from key Jewish figures, and he fulfils key Jewish writings.

It's not only a matter of heritage, Jesus was brought up by Mary and Joseph according to Jewish traditions, he was circumcised, he attended synagogue, sang the Psalms, and on at least one occasion went up to the Temple in Jerusalem for Passover.

It helps us to understand the things that Jesus taught if we understand his Jewish context, this, after-all, is what Matthew is doing. It can also be a useful corrective to the antisemitism which has at times polluted Christian cultures. Jesus taught we should love our neighbours, that includes our Jewish neighbours. The three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are neighbours, and our forbears in faith are Jewish, and Jesus himself was Jewish.

Jesus was Jewish, but that's not the point of the story, as Matthew's account of the life of Jesus is at pains to point out, the point of the story is that Jesus is the Messiah. The Christ, from which we get the word 'Christianity', we read in Acts 11 that, "The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch."

As we know, not all Jews accepted Jesus was the Christ, hardly any of the religious authorities did, and very few of the ordinary people. It even took the disciples quite some time to understand. The things that Jesus said and did reminded the disciples of passages about God from the Old Testament. For instance, when Jesus rebuked the wind and the raging waters, and

all became calm, “in fear and amazement they asked one another, “Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.””

When Jesus asked the disciples, “who do say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “...you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.”

The Church was commissioned by Jesus, and built by Peter.

Built upon the rock that Jesus is the Christ.

That's why we are called Christians, because that's what we believe, that Jesus is the Christ.

Jesus was Jewish, as Matthew demonstrated, but he was a Jew who taught baptism, instituted Communion, commissioned and trained up the disciples to be the Church, and spoke of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Of course Jesus was Jewish, and of course he was Christian.

No one has been, or could be more Christian than Jesus.

In all he said and did he showed that he was the Christ, the Son of God.

He defines what it means to be Christian. Jesus is the Christ.

He is the perfect example of Christianity to which we his disciples aspire.

So if anyone tells you Jesus was not Jewish, they should take it up with Matthew.

And if anyone tells you Jesus was not a Christian, they should take it up with Matthew, or better still with Jesus himself.

The first Christians were Jewish, after the gospels the New Testament is in large part a history of them working out how to be Christian and Jewish, and coping with the slow dawning of the realisation deeply disturbing to them that gentiles could be Christians too.

Here's one last thought, is God a Christian?

If Jesus is indeed the Christ, as the bible says, and the image of the invisible God, as the bible says, then yes – God is a Christian.

God is Christ-like. That's the message that Christianity offers to the world, if you want to understand God, read the gospels.

However, we who call ourselves Christian, we fall far short of being Christ-like.

Christians live less than Christian.

We are the ones who have no claim to the name Christian, that is other than by the grace of God.

We can only proceed along the way our Saviour taught in humility, inspired by his love, powered by the Spirit, and in receipt of His forgiveness.

Amen.