

## Fourth Sunday of Advent



## Emmanuel

1. This is a homily for the 4th Sunday of Advent.
2. The first reading is from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 7, verses 10 to 14. The gospel for this Sunday comes from the gospel of St Matthew, Chapter 1, verses 18-24.
3. To download the text of this homily as a PDF file, go to [sundayhomilies.au](http://sundayhomilies.au)
4. Let's begin by looking at today's first reading from the prophet Isaiah, because the evangelist Matthew takes words written more than seven hundred years earlier and applies them to the birth of Jesus. The Book of Isaiah is one of the longest books in the Bible, with sixty-six chapters in all. Most Scripture scholars agree that it isn't the work of just one writer, but three. We usually speak of them as First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and Third Isaiah.
5. First Isaiah (chapters 1 to 39) is attributed to Isaiah, the son of Amoz, who lived in Jerusalem during the latter half of the eighth century BC. His prophecies are deeply rooted in his own time and place. He doesn't always tell us exactly what events he's referring to, but his listeners would have known immediately — they were living through them.
6. Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55) was written by an anonymous prophet of the sixth century BC, during the Babylonian exile, and probably toward its end, before Babylon fell to Cyrus the king of Persia in 539 BC.
7. Third Isaiah (chapters 56 to 66) dates from after the exile, once the people had returned to Judah and the Temple had been rebuilt around 515 BC.
8. So, to summarise briefly: First Isaiah belongs to the eighth century — roughly 740 to 710 BC. Second Isaiah is written during the exile in the sixth century. And Third Isaiah belongs to the period after the exile, once the Temple was standing again.
9. Today's first reading, from chapter 7, comes from First Isaiah, and is therefore set in the eighth century BC. King Ahaz, a descendant of David, ruled the southern kingdom of Judah from about 735 to 715 BC. He came to the throne in a time of real political turmoil.

10. The Assyrian Empire, under Tiglath-Pileser III, was expanding westward, threatening small kingdoms like Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel.
11. To resist Assyria, King Pekah of Israel and King Rezin of Aram (Syria) formed an alliance and demanded that Ahaz join them. When he refused, they marched against Jerusalem to force him into their coalition, or else replace him with a puppet ruler. Judah was on the brink of collapse, so Ahaz decided to appeal to Assyria for help. That's the immediate background to today's first reading.
12. At that moment, the prophet Isaiah came to the king with a message from God. He urged Ahaz to trust in the Lord rather than seek safety through political deals. Faith — not scheming — would secure Judah's future.
13. Isaiah then offered the king a sign: "Ask the Lord your God for a sign for yourself coming either from the depths of Sheol or from the heights above."
14. But Ahaz refused. He said: "No, I will not put the Lord to the test." It sounds pious, but it isn't. It's not humility — it's unbelief. Ahaz had already decided to seek help from Assyria. He didn't want a sign from God because that would have forced him to abandon his own plan.
15. Isaiah saw through it and rebuked him: "Listen now, House of David! Not satisfied with trying human patience, will you try my God's patience too?" Then comes the prophecy Matthew will quote:
16. "The Lord will give you a sign in any case. Look, the virgin is with child and will give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel. ...". Even though Ahaz refused to trust, God remained faithful. His saving presence would not be withdrawn. The child's very name — *Immanuel*, "God with us" — was a sign of divine protection. We are not told who the woman was; many scholars think she may have been a young woman of the royal court, perhaps even Ahaz's wife. But the focus is not on her identity — it is on what the child's birth signifies.
17. Isaiah continues: "Before the child knows how to refuse the bad and choose the good, the lands whose two kings are frightening you will be deserted." Rezin was killed when Tiglath-Pileser captured Damascus in 732 BC. Pekah was assassinated in a coup led by Hoshea shortly thereafter. Both kingdoms were swept aside — exactly as Isaiah foretold. God's word proved true, though Ahaz himself refused to believe. That is the meaning of today's first reading in its original context. In a moment, we'll see how Matthew takes this ancient prophecy and applies it to the birth of Jesus.
18. The readings of Advent have been pointing in two directions. On the one hand, they look ahead—to the final coming of Christ in glory. On the other, they look back—to the first coming of Christ, to the events surrounding his birth. That's where our focus turns this Sunday.
19. Today we have Matthew's account of the annunciation. In Luke's Gospel, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary. But in Matthew's Gospel, an unnamed angel appears instead to Joseph, and he comes to him in a dream.
20. Both Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus' birth, but they do it in very different ways.

21. Matthew's infancy narrative is much shorter — about 1,800 Greek words versus Luke's 4,000.
22. Matthew's story centres on Joseph; Luke's focuses on Mary.
23. Matthew's Gospel ends with the Holy Family returning from Egypt and settling in Nazareth. Luke's Gospel carries us forward to the story of the young Jesus in the Temple, at the age of twelve.
24. The mood is also very different. Matthew's story is darker, more threatening—overshadowed by Herod and his violent attempt to destroy the child. Luke's, by contrast, is filled with light and joy. He gives us canticles that the Church still sings in the liturgy today: the *Benedictus*, *Magnificat*, *Gloria*, and the *Nunc Dimitis*—songs of praise, faith, and hope that still give voice to the joy of Christ's coming.
25. Although Matthew and Luke tell the story in very different ways, they both agree on the things that matter most.
26. Mary conceives the child Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.
27. When that happens, she and Joseph are not yet living together as husband and wife.
28. An angel announces the birth of the child and says that he is to be named Jesus.
29. He is to be the Saviour.
30. The birth takes place in Bethlehem, during the reign of Herod.
31. Jesus is brought up in Nazareth.
32. Joseph is a descendent of David.
33. So, Matthew's account centres on Joseph; Luke focuses on Mary.
34. What is the best way of describing the relationship between Mary and Joseph in today's Gospel?
35. The *Revised New Jerusalem Bible* says "The birth of Jesus the Messiah happened like this. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, ...". The *New Revised Standard Version* says this: "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, ..." One translation says they are "betrothed", the other uses the word "engaged." Both translations make it clear that they are not yet living together.
36. The word in Matthew's Greek text is μνηστεύω (mnēsteuō).
37. In the Koine Greek, the Greek of the New Testament, that verb means "to betroth", or "to promise in marriage by formal agreement."
38. To understand the relationship between Joseph and Mary at this stage we need to have a closer look at Jewish marriage customs of the late Second Temple period (167 BC to 70 AD). Jewish marriage consisted of two distinct stages:
39. The first stage was betrothal, or אירוסין (erusin) in Hebrew.

40. The second stage of marriage was the home-taking or consummation, נישואין (nee-soo-EEN (nissuin) in Hebrew.
41. Let's look first at betrothal.
42. It was a legal act, usually in front of witnesses, often accompanied by a written marriage contract and a symbolic gift, often a ring or coin.
43. The woman was then called a wife, אִשָּׁה (ishah) in the Hebrew, even though she still lived with her parents.
44. To dissolve the betrothal required a formal divorce.
45. Sexual infidelity during this period was considered adultery (Deuteronomy 22: 23-24).
46. At the second stage of marriage, נישואין (nissuin), the wife left her father's home and went to live with her husband. This marked the beginning of full marital life, including sexual union. Therefore, the meaning of Matthew 1:18 is that Mary and Joseph had already entered into a legally binding marriage contract - אירוסין (erusin) - eh-roo-SEEN -, though they had not yet begun to live together - נישואין (nissuin). In Second Temple Judaism, אירוסין (erusin) was a full legal marriage, even though the couple did not yet cohabit.
47. How old would Mary have been?
48. A girl became eligible for אירוסין (erusin) - betrothal - once she reached puberty, defined in Jewish law by signs of physical maturity - usually around the age of 12.
49. Though the Mishnah was compiled later (c. 200 AD) it reflects earlier Second Temple practices. The relevant text in the Mishnah (Niddah 5:7) says this: "A girl of twelve years and one day is of age, and her vows are binding." Typically, betrothal preceded נישואין (nissuin) - Home-taking - by about a year, meaning that Mary would likely have been thirteen or fourteen years old at the time of Jesus' birth.
50. It was therefore during the time of אירוסין (erusin), the betrothal period, that Mary was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. As we've seen, sexual infidelity during this period was considered adultery. Since Mary and Joseph had not yet lived together, Joseph knew that he could not have been the father of the child.
51. Matthew tells us that because Joseph was a righteous man he was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, and so he decided to dismiss her quietly.
52. Joseph had this in mind when an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying:
53. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Let's pause there for a moment to ask, where else in the Bible do we have the name Joseph associated with dreams?

54. This takes us back to the book of Genesis, and the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob. Joseph was the favourite son of his father, which made his brothers resentful. Their jealousy deepened when Joseph told them of his dreams, which suggested that one day they would bow down to him. Out of envy, the brothers plotted to do away with him. They first threw him into a pit, then sold him to traders who took him down to Egypt. In Egypt Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials. He was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, and thrown into prison. Even there Joseph was known for interpreting dreams. This gift eventually brought him before Pharaoh, who had troubling dreams that no one else could interpret. Joseph was able to explain the meaning of his dreams, explaining to Pharaoh that Egypt would face seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. This so impressed Pharaoh that he made Joseph governor of Egypt, second only to himself. When famine struck, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy grain. Not recognising him, they bowed before him just as his dreams had foretold. Joseph forgave them, telling them that what they had meant for evil, God had turned to good — for through these events, God had preserved life. Joseph then welcomed his father Jacob and all his family to live in Egypt, setting the stage for the story of the Exodus to begin.
55. And so, when Matthew tells us that another Joseph receives God's message in a dream, we are meant to make the connection. Just as the first Joseph was a man of integrity who listened to God and brought his family to safety in Egypt, so too this Joseph—Joseph, husband of Mary—listens, trusts, and obeys. Through his faith and courage, the child Jesus is protected and God's plan moves forward. The old story begins again: once more, God is working through a dream, through a faithful Joseph, to bring about deliverance. The first Joseph saved his family from famine; the second Joseph will safeguard the Saviour who will rescue his people from their sins.
56. In the months ahead, as we journey through Matthew's Gospel, we'll see how he uses echoes from Israel's foundational story - the Exodus - to frame the new act of divine deliverance accomplished in Jesus. Matthew portrays Jesus as a new and greater Moses, leading his people, not from slavery in Egypt but from the deeper bondage of sin and death.
57. That brings us back to the child's name. Joseph is told "you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."
58. Our English pronunciation of the name as "Jesus" comes to us from the Greek, which is Ἰησοῦς (Iēsous). This in turn represents the Greek rendering of the Hebrew name יֵשׁוּעַ (Yeshua), which is a shortened form of יְהוֹשֻׁעַ (Yehoshua). In the Septuagint both the longer and shorter form of the name were translated as Ἰησοῦς (Iēsous).
59. The name יְהוֹשֻׁעַ (Yehoshua) comes from יְהוָה (YHWH), which is the divine name of God, and the verb יָשַׁע (Yasha), which means "to save", "to deliver", or "to rescue."
60. The name Jesus is therefore a confession of faith: "Yahweh saves" or "Yahweh is salvation."
61. From Greek, the name passed into Latin as Iesus, and from there into English as Jesus, with the initial "J" sound developing in later English pronunciation.

62. The name יֵשׁוּעַ (Yeshua) brings us back to the Exodus motif. While Moses led the people out of Egypt, it was his successor Joshua who led them into the Promised Land. Joshua's Hebrew name is יֵשׁוּעַ (Yeshua), which we render in English as *Joshua* when translating directly from Hebrew. The same name appears in the New Testament as *Jesus*, because there it is translated from the Greek form Ἰησοῦς (*Iēsous*), rather than from the Hebrew.
63. The evangelist Matthew then tells us that “all this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet.”
64. This is a phrase that Matthew uses a number of times, quoting from the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea and Zechariah. Matthew wants us to see that the story of Jesus is not something new grafted onto Israel's faith but the long-awaited flowering of everything God had promised. In Jesus, God's faithfulness reaches its fullness—and our hope finds its foundation.
65. In the words of New Testament scholar Richard Hays: “For Matthew, Israel's Scripture constitutes the symbolic world in which both his characters and his readers live and move. The story of God's dealings with Israel is a comprehensive matrix out of which Matthew's Gospel narrative emerges. The fulfilment quotations, therefore, invite the reader to enter an ongoing exploration of the way in which the law and the prophets in their entirety find fulfilment (Matt 5:17) in Jesus and in the kingdom of heaven.”
66. In today's Gospel the word of the Lord that is fulfilled comes from the prophet Isaiah: *Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.*”
67. At first glance, it might seem confusing that the angel instructs Joseph to name the child *Jesus*, while Isaiah's prophecy speaks of a child called *Emmanuel*. But Matthew is not suggesting that the same child should literally have two different names. In the biblical world, a name often expresses the deeper meaning or mission of a person, rather than being just a label. As we've just seen, the name Jesus means “Yahweh saves”; it tells us what he comes to do — to bring salvation to his people. What does the name Emmanuel mean?
68. The name *Emmanuel* comes from the Hebrew עִמָּנוּאֵל (*Immanu'el*). It is formed from three elements: עִם (*im*), which means “with”; נוּ (-*nu*), a pronominal suffix meaning “us,” which, when attached to *im*, gives עִמָּנוּ (*immānu*), “with us”; and אֵל (*ēl*), meaning “God.” Together, עִמָּנוּאֵל (*Immanu'el*) means “God with us.” This tells us who the child is - the very presence of God among his people. So the two names, Jesus and Emmanuel, don't contradict each other; they complement each other. Jesus is Emmanuel: in him, God has come to dwell with us and to save us.
69. Luke Timothy Johnson offers this reflection: “If salvation were simply a matter of correcting some mistaken ideas that humans held, then Jesus need be no more than a good teacher sent by God in the manner of Moses.
70. “If salvation were simply a question of rectifying social structures that were oppressing the people, then Jesus need be no more than a faithful prophet sent by God in the manner of Amos or Isaiah.

71. "If salvation, in short, were simply a human matter, then Jesus needed to be only a human being.
72. "But what if the New Testament speaks about salvation in terms quite other than didactic or political? What if the witness of the New Testament - and the life and practice of the church from the beginning - regarded salvation as something far more than the adjustment of thought or of social structures?"
73. Theologian Fleming Rutledge emphasises the need for a saviour: "From beginning to end, the Holy Scriptures testify that the predicament of fallen humanity is so serious, so grave, so irremediable from within, that nothing short of divine intervention can rectify it. The human heart needs to be changed from the bottom up, but it cannot be changed by our 'natural strength and good works.' It can be changed only by the intervening presence of the living God."
74. Matthew "bookcases" his Gospel with the idea of Emmanuel.
75. In chapter 1 he sets the tone for everything that follows when he quotes the prophet Isaiah: "Look, the virgin is with child and will give birth to a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means 'God-is-with-us'. From the very start, Matthew wants his readers to understand that in Jesus, God has entered human history in a new and definitive way. Jesus is not merely a messenger from God; he is God's presence among his people; he is both God-with-us and Saviour.
76. At the conclusion of the Gospel, the risen Lord tells his disciples: "And look, I am with you always till the end of time." Here the promise of Emmanuel reaches its fulfilment. The one who is God-with-us in the flesh now assures his followers of his enduring presence through all time. Matthew's Gospel must be read between those two bookends. The teaching, healing, suffering and resurrection of Jesus reveals what God-with-us looks like in action.
77. In today's readings Ahaz and Joseph each receive a message from God. Ahaz stubbornly refuses to listen to the word of God that comes to him through the prophet Isaiah. Joseph receives the word of God through an angelic appearance in a dream. What is his response?
78. W. H. Auden captures Joseph's turmoil in *For the Time Being - A Christmas Oratorio*, written in 1944.
79. We come to that part of the poem called the Temptations of St Joseph. Imagine how St Joseph must have felt when he found out that Mary was pregnant. Mary has told him about the angelic visitation and how she had conceived by the power of God's Holy Spirit. "Joseph, you have heard what Mary said occurred; Yes, it may be so. Is it likely? No.
80. Mary may be pure, But, Joseph, are you sure? How is one to tell? Suppose for instance ... Well ....?
81. We can imagine Joseph seeking a sign that what has happened is indeed the work of God: "All I ask is one important and elegant proof that what my love has done was really at your will and that your will is love."
82. What answer does Joseph receive? "No, you must believe; be silent and sit still".
83. "And Joseph did fall silent and sit still, holding the mystery awkwardly in his troubled mind. He came to believe that, against all odds and beyond all reason,

what had taken place in his betrothed, was indeed of God.” Unlike Ahaz some seven centuries before, Joseph in silence bows to the divine will, choosing faith over fear, and trust over self-reliance.