

First Reading: Isaiah 7:10-14

Second Reading: Romans 1:1-7

Gospel: Matthew 1:18-25

DO NOT BE AFRAID, GOD IS WITH US

A few weeks ago, at the beginning of Advent, the Word of God started to wake us up and call us to be aware of our need to be liberated from what is suffocating our life in Zambia today. Thus we can make ourselves sincerely ready to welcome Christ who is coming to set us free. This last Sunday now helps us to see what is it that we need to do when we wake up. We are to look into ourselves and around us so that in trying our best to prepare ourselves, we may heartily repent from the part we have been playing in dehumanising our relationships with ourselves and with one another. For that actually closes us up against God in us and around us. Having thus started repenting, we come to see how much we need Christ in our life to heal our wounded personality and our wounded society. This is when we all start to take heart that at last we are welcoming our liberator who is coming so that we can start to breathe again and to rejoice that at last things may soon straighten up in a real way. However, after we have been making quite a good effort to put things right in our lives, all too soon we may find that after all we seem to be failing so much that not only are we being tempted to give up.

That is how we start to lose faith that any change for the good is possible or that it can last. We may even find ourselves saying, look at our Churches and our Government, including all the highest leadership, have they really helped us and our country to be a more just and peaceful people where all the human rights are respected and promoted? All around us we continue to see no end to corruption, wrangling for power, abuse of women and children everywhere, and so on. We start giving up all hope, and so for us religion may become just a little cosy comfort without it being able to make the least difference to our troublesome reality. This is where the Word of God today make us face up to our all too human situation and challenges us as to whether we really have faith or not, or what kind of faith do we have. In such a situation that threatens our faith the Word of God confronts us with two types of reaction, that of faith or unfaith, that of trust or distrust, that of hope or hopelessness. In other words, are we to do like King Ahaz, in the reading from Isaiah, or are we to take Joseph's attitude, shown us in Matthew's Gospel?

Let us look first at how weak King Ahaz forgot the history of his people, a history in which God is remembered as always having been faithful to his people and constantly stood by their side in all their moments of distress and whenever their very existence as a people was at stake. In fact that was the statement of faith that all Jews were supposed to recite every day. But Ahaz, instead of relying on God's help, relied only on his own very limited power and that of some allies that were not only hardly to be trusted but who turned him into a subject and even made him renounce his God. When he realised that all odds were against him and that his allies had let him down miserably, he abandoned all hope and even refused to turn to the God of the Covenant. However, Isaiah, after having tried his best to no avail to put courage into his King and the people finally got frustrated and gave Ahaz a sign showing how what is impossible for humans is indeed possible for God. He gave him the sign of a maiden bearing a child and who was God-with-us, Emmanuel. This was to show him that if he trusted in God, then God was able to deliver his people even against hopeless odds. But Ahaz refused to accept that sign and so he and his people ended up as captives in Babylon.

But the Gospel presents us with a person who was the very opposite of the faithless King Ahaz. This man was Joseph, a just man, a man of faith, who when he was about to take home Mary as his virgin spouse was faced with a really hard situation. How could it be that Mary could have betrayed his trust in her by her becoming heavy with child out of wedlock? He just couldn't believe and understand what was happening. But instead of becoming self-righteous and disowning her publicly, as the law dictated in such instances, he chose to spare her any shame and sent her away quietly. He still loved her and believed in her so much. But that was only the best that human goodness could ever do. He still felt that somehow that was not good enough. That is why he remained

seriously disturbed about it as he still could not find it in himself to completely lose faith in Mary. Then, seeing how strong Joseph's faith was, God was able to make things clear for him in a dream. Indeed, God is always ready to help us find and fight for good solutions wherever there are seemingly insurmountable difficulties and obstacles in our effort to put right some unjust situations. "Cibase ndi pfupa, siciola" (being related is like a bone, it does not rot). God will always be there for us in all situations.

Ahaz's faith failed when he was given the sign of how God can save even against the worst odds. But Joseph's faith was fully open even when, as far as it was humanly possible, he could hardly believe or understand why that was happening to him. When Joseph was shown by God what his predicament meant he cast all doubts aside and immediately went and took Mary home as his spouse. He believed that what was impossible for us was possible for God. Thus God fulfilled through Mary the promise he made through Isaiah that the Christ was to be made human. Thus Christ would, for us and with us – *never without us* -- make the whole of humanity keep up the struggle for greater peace and justice in all spheres of life.

Isaiah prophesied how God's Kingdom is to be everlasting and not like humankind's kingdom which sooner or later crumbles away. Jesus so dismayed the authorities of Israel who were hoping for an earthly messiah who would perpetuate their own kingdom built simply by human power. Like Ahaz before them, they refused to recognise and accept the Emmanuel, God-with-us, in Jesus. They saw and heard with what authority he spoke and acted with the power of God in him, building up around him, in faith, hope and love, a Kingdom of grace and peace, justice and love. This is today's theme: "Do not be afraid! God is with us!" In Zambia today, whenever we simply rely on our own talents and keep measuring everything by our own set of standards and values, we just won't get anywhere!

How can the strong and the weak among us, the advantaged and the disadvantaged, start sharing equally the good things God meant for all? How can we have politics and business practices that promote the common good and the life of justice for everyone? The answer is clear - as it was clear to the just man Joseph – that we recognise that God-with-us-and-for-us, Jesus Christ the Emmanuel, was indeed born through Mary the humble Maid. What was impossible proved to be possible for God. And that is just as true today here in Zambia! For Jesus our Liberator has come and he tells us: "It is me, do not be afraid!"

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

- What makes us lose faith in times of difficulties in our families, our small Christian communities, our nation of Zambia?
- In facing serious difficulties, Ahaz had no trust in God, while Joseph had great trust in God. Do you still trust in God when you're faced with difficulties and how do you show that trust?
- What is the most important lesson you have learned during this season of Advent 2007 and how will it help you in 2008?

SKETCH

Have one person acting as Joseph and another one acting as Mary. Joseph discovers that Mary is with child, and is tempted to divorce her. He is visited by the angel. He believes that God was about to fulfil through Mary the promise he made through the prophet Isaiah. He is very happy indeed!

COMMUNITY PRAYERS

- We pray, Lord, that we may always trust in you and not lose hope in times of difficulties in our homes, small Christian communities, and Zambia *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, for the spirit of helping those in oppressive situations to be lifted up. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray, Lord, to welcome you fully and joyfully in our hearts and homes this Christmas. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*

JESUIT CENTRE FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

"Promoting Faith and Justice"

P.O. Box 37774 10101 Lusaka, Zambia

E-mail: jctr@jesuits.org.zm Website: www.jctr.org.zm