

4th Sunday of Advent (A)
(Isaiah 7:10-14 / Matthew 1:18-24)
18.12.2016

Dear brothers and sisters,

Yesterday, on the seventeenth of December, we entered into the second phase of our Advent pilgrimage. During three weeks we have celebrated our expectation of the Lord's coming in glory at the end of time. From now on, we focus on the great act of remembering the Lord's first coming into the world, some two thousand years ago in the child of Bethlehem. This is the mystery that we shall celebrate on Christmas night. In the night of our world, a light will shine! Let us not despair: there is hope! Let us not despair, there is a way forward! In the night of our lives, a way of life will be opened up for us!

These two comings of the Lord celebrated during the Advent Season are linked. We would not be able to wait for the coming of the Lord at the end of time if He had not already come in Bethlehem some two thousand years ago. The Lord came, and He will come back again.

This passage from St Matthew's gospel we have just heard recounts the birth of Jesus from St Joseph's viewpoint. It ends with a quotation verbatim of the passage of the prophet Isaiah heard in our first reading: "The Virgin will conceive and give birth to a Son and they will call him **Emmanuel, a name which means 'God-is-with-us'**".

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, we prepare to celebrate the good news of God-with-us. With the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, God is with us now and for ever. Let us not forget that the Risen Lord just before his Ascension will reassure us with these words: "I am with you always".

The mystery of Christmas is good news for those of us who feel lonely, those who are depressed, those who carry a heavy cross: We are no longer alone! God is with us walking at our side, dwelling within us, helping us to carry our Cross, delivering us from guilt and shame by his mercy and his forgiveness, delivering us from death through the mystery of his death and resurrection.

The Son of the Virgin will be Emmanuel, a name which means 'God is with us'. If such is the name of the new born child Jesus, our name should no longer be just: 'Peter'... 'Mary'... 'Jim'..., but 'Peter with God', 'Mary with God', 'Jim with God'. Is that how we see it? This is not an exaggeration! We are speaking a message of good news which is truth we can believe in. We are speaking of the implication of Christmas in our lives today! Are we aware of the presence of Jesus by our side in our daily life? Are we aware of the covenant of love which unites us to Jesus today, every day and always? Another question arises. It stems from our belief that God is with us. When people see us, do they see God to be with us? Does our relationship with God make God visible to others when they look at us?

In the busyness of these days leading to Christmas, let us take time to prepare our hearts to welcome the good news of Jesus, God-with-us, Emmanuel.

We shall do this if we give time to prayer, which is our way of relating to the One who is with us, our way of being with Him. Prayer is a time during which we welcome the Lord, listen to Him and speak with Him; it is a time when we leave the Lord free to work within us.

It is in prayer that we learn how to recognize God to be with us through our brothers and sisters in humanity, especially those in need of any kind, the poor! Coming to their help is the way for us to be with God, to serve Him and love Him.

It is by welcoming God's mercy in our own regard in prayer, that we become able to reflect God's mercy all around us.

It was certainly not easy for Joseph to welcome the mystery of 'Mary-with-God'. He was deeply troubled and had even thought of divorcing Mary informally. But Joseph was a man of faith and prayer. He prayed and welcomed with faith the message of the angel, the message of God. He accepted God's will in prayer. Joseph remains a model for all of us..., a light and an encouragement. Like him, we have to pray in order to recognize God's will, God's action in our lives, so as to consent to it and welcome it wholeheartedly.

If we are late and have not yet sent our letter to Santa, we could write to him and ask him to grant us the grace to become more and more aware of the presence of the Lord by our side. This is really the grace, the gift we are in need of. This is really the grace the world is in need of. This is really the grace the Church is in need of! Come, Lord Jesus, and remain with us! Really be God-with-us. May our lives be more and more lives with God!

Amen