

## December: Preparation



The Gospel passages put before us by the Church during Advent in this year of Matthew are full of warning about the great event to come. First comes a warning about being ready for the final coming of the Son of Man. This comes from a passage late in the Gospel, where Jesus is warning the disciples of the final Judgment. Mark had warned the disciples of the persecutions to come, but his discourse had ended on an up-beat note, with the promise of rescue by the Son of Man, coming to gather his chosen ones from the four corners of the earth. Matthew gives a different note by inserting here the parables of warning: we need to use our talents; we need to have oil in our lamps like the wise wedding-attendants; we need to earn a place with the sheep at the right hand of the divine judge by caring for the poor and needy. The Son of Man will come at a moment when he is not expected, like a thief in the night; we must be prepared and ready.

The same warning note is struck on the second Sunday of Advent through the warnings of John the Baptist to the Pharisees, that 'brood of vipers', who think they can rely on being racially the sons of Abraham. What have these threats against people of long ago to say to us? Surely the same warning applies: we go to church, we read the diocesan website. But is that enough to make us secure, especially at a time of crisis in the Church, with so many persecutions, martyrdoms and the unprecedented refugee crisis?

For the third Sunday of Advent the angle on John the Baptist's ministry is different, announcing that the time has come for the Kingdom, for the fulfilment of the promises of the coming Kingdom of healing and peace. John is the prophet of peace, demanding fidelity to the Lord and pointing out his final messenger.

For the fourth Sunday the accent always changes, moving on to Mary as she prepares for the birth of her Son. In this year the situation is shown to us through the eyes of Joseph; the story might be called 'the Annunciation to Joseph'. Why does Joseph want to divorce her? The story can be read in two ways. The first is that he suspects her of cheating on him, but is so forgiving that he wants to spare her shame of a public hearing. This does not fit too well with the description of Joseph as 'just' or 'righteous', specifically obedient to the Law. A second reading fits the context better: the point of the whole story is the long genealogy, 'A begat B, B begat C, etc'. It ends with Joseph adopting Jesus into the House of David by naming him. In Judaism only a father names the child, so Joseph, by naming Jesus, adopts him into the House of David. But on the way to this conclusion he had hesitated: knowing that the child in her womb was conceived by the overshadowing of the Spirit, should he withdraw from the partnership? The angel is sent to tell him that he should not, for he has a job to do, the adoption of Jesus.

The genealogy itself (read on Christmas Eve) has often been condemned as patriarchal: it is all about the male lineage. But among the men is a group of feisty women, each of whom earns her place by courage and initiative. Rahab protects the Hebrew spies at Jericho. Ruth sticks by her mother-in-law to claim her heritage through Joab. Bathsheba wins the kingship for her son Solomon. Finally Mary braves the stigma of unmarried mother. This is no group of sexually suspect insertions or passive lay figures; each heroically wins her place as a mother in the history of salvation.