

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

Christmas Day¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian. For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eighteenth Verse of the first Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁴

“The birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of

David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: and knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

“Taking it on faith” is not easy. Consider the case of Joseph, who found his espoused to be pregnant before they were intimate. Today, such an event might not even raise an eyebrow, at least not in our country. In Israel some 2,000 years ago, however, such a thing was unquestioned grounds to terminate the marriage, and would leave the woman destitute and in absolute shame. Indeed, had he been so inclined, Joseph could easily have had Mary stoned to death for infidelity.

Joseph, however, was a “just man,” and prone by nature to mercy. Therefore, he was inclined to take the quietest possi-

ble measures, to “*put her away privily.*” He did not wish to “*make her a public example*”, which would likely have resulted in shunning and beatings at the very least.

Joseph was also not a rash man who would act on impulse out of anger. Instead, we are told, he “*thought on these things,*” considering carefully his options and the results of those actions. We can only imagine the anguish the couple must have experienced as Joseph decided what he should do.

While he considered what he should do, God sent an angel to reassure him: “*But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.*”⁶

How difficult a thing to hear and to accept. We can only marvel at the heart and the faith of a man who could find it in himself to accept this situation. Joseph was just such a man. And the angel had more to say to him: “*And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.*”⁷

How overwhelming this message must have seemed to Joseph. Not only is his betrothed wife pregnant before he has been with her, but she bears the child of God, and the name that will be given the child is already determined. Also, the child will save Israel from her sins. And Joseph had to “*take it on faith.*”

A lesser man would probably have been unable to do what Joseph did. The son of Jacob, a carpenter by trade, Joseph was driven by being a “*just man.*” He was clearly dedicated to mercy and love, and was deeply dedicated to the welfare of his family.

God clearly saw great virtue in Joseph. He not only selected this man to serve as the earthly father of the Christ child, but three times He sent His angels to lead Joseph. The first time the angels reassured Joseph that he should go ahead and take Mary for his wife, which Joseph did do. The second time, after Jesus was born, God again sent an angel to warn him to take Jesus and Mary and escape into Egypt because Herod the King sought to kill all the children of Bethlehem. Finally, after Herod's death, God again sent the angel to Joseph to tell him to return to his home in Nazareth, and again, Joseph obeyed.⁸

How many of us would follow these instructions brought to us in dreams? How many of us could accept our spouse expecting a child not our own? How many of us could accept such things on faith?

Each of these things was done to fulfill a prophecy. A prophet had said that a virgin would bring forth a son, who would be called Emmanuel, meaning, "*God is with us.*" Again, a prophet had said, "*out of Egypt have I called my Son.*"⁹ Finally, the prophets had said of the Lord, "*He shall be called a Nazarene.*"¹⁰

This couple, Joseph and the virgin Mary, are examples of faith that shine down through all the ages. As difficult as the news of the impending birth must have been for Joseph, even more so was it for Mary, who could have faced death for adultery had Joseph rejected her. But we remember her acceptance of God's will for her: "*And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.*"¹¹

Taking it on faith. What God wanted, they accepted, regardless of their personal reservations or concerns. May we ever be found as willing to accept His will for us in all we do.

Let us pray.

Eternal Father, let us always accept Thy will in all we do. Give to us the wisdom and discernment to discover Thy will for our lives when it is unclear to us, the courage and dedication to hold fast to Your will in the face of any doubts and opposition, and the absolute trust in You to make those choices. Teach us, Lord, to take it on faith. *Amen.*

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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for the First Sunday after Christmas, 2012.

² *The Table of Lessons*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xviii (Anglican Church of Canada 1962).

³ Isaiah 9:2-7 (KJV).

⁴ St. Matthew 1:18-25 (KJV).

⁵ St. Matthew 1:19-20 (NIV).

⁶ St. Matthew 1:20 (NIV).

⁷ St. Matthew 1:21 (NIV).

⁸ St. Matthew 2:13 (NIV).

⁹ St. Matthew 2:15 (NIV).

¹⁰ St. Matthew 2:23 (NIV).

¹¹ St. Luke 1:38 (RSV).

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