

GOSPEL

MATTHEW 1:18-24

This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph; but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, and said 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.' Now all this took place to fulfil the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, a name which means 'God-is-with-us'. When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had told him to do: he took his wife to his home.

The Gospel of the Lord.

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

The liturgy for today, the Fourth and last Sunday of Advent, is characterized by the theme of closeness, God's closeness to humanity. The Gospel passage shows us two people, the two people who, more than anyone else, were involved in this mystery of love: the Virgin Mary and her husband, Joseph. A mystery of love, the mystery of God's closeness to humanity.

Mary is presented in the light of the prophet who says: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son". Matthew the Evangelist recognizes that this happened in Mary, who conceived Jesus through the Holy Spirit. The Son of God "comes" into her womb in order to become man, and she welcomes him. Thus, in a unique way, God drew near to mankind, taking on flesh through a woman: God drew near to us and took on flesh through a woman. To us too, in a different way, God draws near with his grace in order to enter our life and offer us the gift of his Son. What do we do?

Do we welcome him, let him draw near, or do we reject him, push him away? As Mary, freely offering herself to the Lord of history, allowed him to change the destiny of mankind, so too can we, by welcoming Jesus and seeking to follow him each day, cooperate in his salvific plan for us and for the world. Mary thus appears to us as a model to look to and upon whose support we can count in our search for God, in our closeness to God, in thus allowing God to draw close to us and in our commitment to build the culture of love.

The other protagonist of today's Gospel is Saint Joseph. The Evangelist highlights that alone, Joseph cannot explain to himself the event which he sees taking place before his eyes, namely, Mary's pregnancy. Just then, in that moment of doubt, even anguish, God approaches him — him too — through his messenger and [Joseph] is enlightened about the nature of this maternity: "the child conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit". Thus, in facing this extraordinary event, which surely gave rise to many questions in his heart, he trusts totally in God who has drawn near to him, and after his invitation, does not repudiate his betrothed, but takes her to him and takes Mary to wife. In accepting Mary, Joseph knowingly and lovingly receives Him who has been conceived in her through the wondrous work of God, for whom nothing is impossible. Joseph, a just and humble man, teaches us to always trust in God, who draws near to us: when God approaches us, we must entrust ourselves to him. Joseph teaches us to allow ourselves to be guided by Him with willing obedience.

These two figures, Mary and Joseph, who were the first to welcome Jesus through faith, introduce us to the mystery of Christmas. Mary helps us to assume an attitude of openness in order to welcome the Son of God into our concrete life, in our flesh. Joseph spurs us to always seek God's will and to follow it with full trust. Both allow God to draw near to them.

"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel', which means, God-with-us". Thus the angel says: "the child shall be

called Emmanuel, which means God-with-us", in other words, God near to us. And to God who draws near, do I open the door — to the Lord — when I sense an interior inspiration, when I hear him ask me to do something more for others, when he calls me to pray?

God-with-us, God who draws near. This message of hope, which is fulfilled at Christmas, leads to fulfilment of the expectation of God in each one of us too, in all the Church, and in the many little ones whom the world scorns, but whom God also loves and to whom God draws near.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What doubts and fears do you struggle with in believing and understanding God's work and presence in your life?
2. When and how have you felt God draw beside you to guide or change your mind about a decision? How did you recognise that it was God's voice and direction?
3. How do you feel about the idea of God desiring 'to be with you' to 'walk with you' personally and guide you in every moment of the day?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the 'Glory Be' or similar prayer.