

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT [A]

Isaiah 7: 10 - 14

Romans 1: 1 - 7

Matthew 1: 18 - 24

King Ahaz, God's anointed King of Israel, was a very nasty piece of work.

Not the sort of person you'd want to meet in a dark night in an alley as you probably wouldn't come out in one piece.

Ahaz gave his life up to wickedness, and turned his back on the One True God by setting up a pagan altar in the Temple - God's House - in Jerusalem.

But, his worst action, on a human level, was to sacrifice his son to a pagan god.

The Kings of Israel were supposed to be set apart, through their anointing, as the image and representative of God to His people.

Yet so many of them were corrupt, wicked, and lusted after power, just like King Ahaz.

It was the job of the prophets like Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah to call them back to God's ways; and these three were all involved in speaking God's word of judgement to Ahaz.

Time after time he ignored them completely.

The context of the first reading today is that Isaiah is doing just that.

He's just said to Ahaz: "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."

Is. 7: 9

Without God you're nothing, and all you touch will turn to dust.

Then we take the story up in our passage where the Lord God, through Isaiah, offers to give Ahaz a sign that He is the Lord of heaven and earth, and will watch over Ahaz and Israel if the King is faithful to Him.

But Ahaz, with contempt in his voice, says: "I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test." Is. 7: 12

Not because Ahaz is a humble man who wouldn't presume to ask God to prove that He is the Lord.

No: Ahaz is a man who has no time for God, and wants to have the power of God for himself.

He's torn God out of the sanctuary of his heart, and put himself there instead.

Then the Lord, through Isaiah, gives him a very strange message.

The Lord God will give him a sign anyway, and it will be this: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel [God is with us]. Is. 7: 14

This helpless baby will know, unlike Ahaz: "To reject the wrong and choose the right."

Is. 7: 15

In a mysterious way this baby - this son - embodies the true attributes of the King of Israel.

Although Ahaz was filled with the Spirit of God when he was anointed King, he obstinately opposed and rejected the Spirit of God for a spirit of evil instead.

But this baby will be a 'sign of contradiction' to King Ahaz because in that baby boy dwells the Spirit of God in all its fullness.

Isaiah's prophecy has a direct meaning for Ahaz.

In spite of the Lord's offer of a miracle to verify the prophecy, and aid Ahaz's faith, Ahaz wouldn't trust the Lord.

He plundered the Lord's temple to send a payment to the King of Assyria to rescue him from his enemies.

Ahaz was rescued by Assyria, but at a great cost: He became a vassal to Assyria.

The baby was a constant 'sign of contradiction' to Ahaz that he should have trusted in the Spirit of God to guide and protect him.

But, of course, for Christians, Isaiah's prophecy has another layer of meaning.

It points towards the coming of another baby, born of a Virgin, who is Immanuel - God is with us.

It points towards Jesus. It's a sign to us of God breaking into His world in a completely unique, and unexpected way.

Just as the angels promised to the shepherds on the hills outside Bethlehem: "Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Lk. 2: 11 - 12 Forty days after his birth Jesus is taken to the Temple, His Father's House, by Mary and Joseph to be presented, and dedicated to God for His service.

There they meet the old man Simeon who was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he immediately recognised that this little baby is the long-awaited salvation promised by God.

Not just for his Chosen People, the Jews, but for the Gentiles too - He is everyone's Saviour.

"Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.'" Lk. 2: 33 - 35

Jesus will be a 'sign of contradiction' to the world, and He will be opposed by all those powers in the world that try to put themselves in God's place.

And, of course, that ultimate opposition will come on the Cross where the powers of darkness seek to snuff out God in Christ so that they can rule in the hearts and minds of men and women.

But how does this affect me in my own life in 2010?

I'm not like King Ahaz, or those who sent Jesus to the Cross; but don't

I, often in small, seemingly insignificant ways, try to put something other than the Lord in the sanctuary of my heart?

The Blessed John Henry Newman was a man of towering intellect, and a keen academic mind.

This could have puffed him up with pride, believing that it was all his own doing; and he could have had a glittering career at Oxford University had he not followed his heart's desire to serve the Lord.

Yet when he was made a Cardinal he took as his motto 'Heart speaks unto heart.'

This was the secret to living his life in the manner in which His Lord wanted him to live it. It might sound easy enough, but it's hard.

Hard, because all of us would rather not hear the beating of the Lord's heart. We'd rather hear just our own.

In so many small ways all of us dethrone the Lord from our hearts - I know that I do - and when we do our lives start to go awry.

In small ways at first, but then as life unfolds we can become coarsened and hard-hearted in our dealings with each other.

But worse than that, Jesus no longer figures in the equation.

He's no longer Immanuel - God is with us - He's God so distant from us.

Christmas is just round the corner: so let's make ourselves small, and child-like again so that we can enter into the stable at Bethlehem.

There we'll meet anew the baby who is Immanuel - God is with us - and, by letting His heart speak unto our hearts, He will be enthroned in the sanctuary of our hearts once more.