

Love, that is the theme of this fourth Sunday in advent. Love is also the only commandment that Christ gave us: "Love one another as I have loved you." Yet, when we listen to the readings today, it is a more encompassing type of love that emanates. In many ways, our word 'love' is incomplete and simple. In Greek, there exist four types of love: Eros (erotic), storge (familial), Philia (friendship), and agape (unconditional). The more encompassing love is agape; it is the love that God has for humankind: "For God so loved the world, He gave His only begotten Son." The readings today highlight the gift of the Incarnation that we will celebrate next week.

For the first three weeks of Advent, we have heard the story of John the Baptist. It is he who prepares the way of the Lord and lays the ground work for Christ's ministry. Today's Gospel reading shifts us from John the Baptist to Mary and Joseph and their story. In this particular selection of readings for this Year A, we are in the gospel of Matthew. Unlike in Year B where we are told the story of Mary's acceptance of the Christ in her womb, and unlike in Year C where we are told about the visit between Mary and Elizabeth, in Year A, we hear about the tribulations of Joseph and his acceptance of the Christ into his life.

Remember, Matthew's gospel is the most Jewish. In many ways, the gospel reading today is evidence of Matthew's placing of Christ Jesus as the fulfilment of all the prophecies heard in the Old Testament. Matthew's gospel clearly places Jesus in the lineage of Abraham, Moses, and David. His intent is largely to emphasise the Jewish character and origins of our modern faith.

Joseph descends from the line of David. As we hear in the first reading, repeated again in the gospel, Isaiah foretells that "Listen, O house of David! Is it not enough for you to weary people, must you also weary my God? Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel." The one who is with God, that is, Emmanuel, is to be from the House of David. This is the promise that God made to the Jewish people, and this would have been known to Joseph and to others at the time.

But it does seem fantastical, even with a belief in God and His might, that a virgin would give birth to the Messiah. And that it is Joseph's own betrothed. His reaction initially makes sense. We can all relate to Joseph. The visit of the angel, much like when we open our hearts to hear the word of God, changes Joseph. What immense faith in and love of God Joseph shows when he, as the gospel tells us, "t[akes] his wife into his home."

What an act of faith and of trust in God that Joseph demonstrates. Through Joseph, we see God's love—His agape—working in the world. Reflecting upon what to say and on the readings, I was drawn, as I always am when I give a reflection at Mass, to the encyclicals and exhortations and Church documents. I consult often a compendium entitled *Catholic Social Thought: Encyclicals and Documents from Pope Leo XIII to Pope Francis*. In the case of this reflection, in searching for what popes have said on love, I found in the compendium the one passage indexed under 'love.' This passage is from Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'*. Within this passage, several elements struck me as relevant to how I see Joseph's love and God's love emanating from the readings. Pope Francis writes, "We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it" (Francis, 2016: 661). When we consider the gospel reading, we hear of Joseph who, at first, reacts in a manner that serves his interest alone. He wants to preserve himself, but this is not his calling. In his reaction to the angel's visit, we see Joseph seize his responsibility toward others and toward the world. To quote Pope Francis again, he is "being good and decent."

The passage in *Laudato si'* is entitled "Civic and Political Love," and much of the later passage deals with this aspect. Even though this might not be an exact fit for the readings on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, Pope Francis' message does resonate with how Joseph responds. "Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care," Pope Francis writes, "is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world" (2016: 662). Joseph demonstrates mutual care for Mary and for the Christ growing in her womb. The act of welcoming her into his home quite literally built a better world. Pope

Francis continues, “Love for society and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of charity which affects not only relationships between individuals but also ‘macro-relationships, social, economic, and political ones’” (2016: 662). As Catholics, as Christians, we are called to love our neighbours and to do acts of good work. Joseph is the example that we ought to emulate this Advent and upcoming Christmas season: he teaches us to hear the call of God and to be good and decent and to love.

There is a quotation from Saint Ignatius of Loyola that I quite like—in fact, it is on a magnet on the fridge, so it is hard to avoid it: “Love consists in sharing what one has and what one is with those one loves. Love ought to show itself in deeds more than in words.” As we head into this final week of preparation before we welcome the Christ into the world, let us think of how we can show our love for each other—to those whom we know and to those whom we know not—in our deeds.