

Welcoming the Word in Year A

Building on Rock

Verna A. Holyhead, S.G.S.



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Introduction

One thrust of the human endeavor that has emerged in our times arises from a fascination with the conquest of space. We have made extraordinary advances in space exploration, but half a century ago when Sputnik's odyssey was only two years old, Abraham Heschel, the American Jewish philosopher, commented:

To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.¹

For observant Jews, the celebration of the Sabbath is an expression of their fidelity to such time: a weekly welcome to "bride Sabbath" who is the sign of God's eternal covenant fidelity to them, a constant security in their repeated insecurity of exile and return. The "seventh day" is the culmination of the Genesis timeline, for it is on the Sabbath that God finds a place of rest, of mutual creative presence in the depths of humanity and in all that God has made.

For the early church, building on its Jewish heritage, Sunday evolved as the "eighth" day—or the "first" day of the new creation on which we celebrate the recurring memorial of the marriage in Christ of God and humanity, the paschal mystery that is the hub of human history. Each week Christ calls us to gather for a time, either at the Sunday Eucharist or at Sunday worship in the absence of a priest, to affirm our identity, our being as a member of his body. We come to surrender thankfully to God a short time of our week: without competition, without what can often be the show business of everyday life, without the insular companionship of only those whom we like or associate with at other times.

In an article on the meaning of Sunday, written when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI quoted an incident from the year 304 in

North Africa. Some Christians had gathered one Sunday as church at the home of a local Christian leader named Emeritus. The Roman proconsul interrupted their gathering to ask Emeritus why he had allowed these people into his house. Emeritus replied that they were his sisters and brothers. The proconsul insisted that this was a dangerous gathering that should have been forbidden. Emeritus then replied, “Without the day of the Lord we cannot live.”² How many of us today could answer with the same commitment, with the same conviction that it would be dangerous *not* to gather on Sunday?

The life of the Sunday assembly flows from the two tables of Word and Sacrament. When the Lectionary readings are proclaimed, the Word of God becomes audible, visible, and present at the heart of the local gathered church. When in faith we welcome the Scriptures, Christ speaks to us as a community of disciples—to challenge and to comfort us in our own global, ecclesial, and personal “now.”

The Great Christ has done this
Not “done” but “does” for past is always missing
When Jesus comes in all his mysteries.³

But it is not just a matter of listening to the Word. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells the parable of the “Two Builders” in order to move the emphasis from *hearing* to *acting* upon “these words of mine” (Matt 7:24). The wise builder expended time and energy in order to dig deep to rock foundations, and so his house withstood the onslaught of the furious storms. He is an image of us when we are disciples who energetically and persistently build our lives on the rock of Jesus’ word as an unshakable foundation. This enables us to stand firm and meet the demands of gospel living when life batters us and when even the church itself may sometimes feel like shifting sand beneath our feet. The foolish builder is the inattentive “quick fix” person who builds without concern for the foundation: sand is good enough and easier to dig. When we just listen but do not act on his words, says Jesus, we are like this foolish builder. When our lives are hit by storms and the flash floods of unexpected tension or tragedy, our discipleship collapses and is washed away, or it gradually erodes because of our small but repeated infidelities.

It is in the weekly Liturgy of the Word that most Christians hear the Scriptures, but it is beyond the liturgy, in our families and communities, our workplaces and leisure time, that we are called continuously to act on the Word. The reflections that follow will, I hope, be of some small help in our continuous and deep digging into the Word of God—in both the Old

and New Testaments—that will enable us to build our lives on the firm foundation, this rock. We build houses so that we can live in them and welcome others into a shared space. When we enter into the Word as preachers, teachers, lovers of sacred reading (*lectio divina*), and as Christ’s faithful united in the diversity of our ways of life, we find shelter in the Word for both our stormy and calm days. Isaiah calls his people to “enlarge the site of your tent” (Isa 54:2) so that they may welcome new descendants into a joyful and safe dwelling. We are called to make room in our lives for new insights and greater hospitality to the Word of God, so that building on this rock of the Word may be a continuous joy and challenge, not only for ourselves but also for those with whom we share it—by both word and example.

Aspects of my life have also been built on other words that are an echo of the Bible and a commentary on it: the words of St. Benedict in what he called “this modest Rule for beginners” (*Rule of Benedict*, 73.1). Many people find in this fifth century spiritual master’s text a wisdom that endures as a help in their seeking God today in very different contexts from the original monastic context for which it was written. At the beginning of his Rule, Benedict says that the search for God was always to have “the Gospel as our guide” (*Rule of Benedict*, Prologue 21). In his last chapter, he repeats his conviction (with a significant emphasis on *humanity*, characteristic of the man and his Rule) that the Old and New Testaments are “the truest of guides for human life” (RB 73.3). Therefore, as in the first book of this series, *Welcoming the Word in Year C: With Burning Hearts*, I have added for those who may be interested, and as the sixth chapter, a brief weekly reflection from the Rule that can be mixed with the biblical Word as an additional leaven to help us rise in our commitment to the Word proclaimed each Sunday. The continuing personal challenge for me is to test for myself, at least from Sunday to Sunday, the belief that the monastic life, and indeed the Christian life, would be stillborn without the Scriptures—read, prayed, and lived. That Benedict continues to pass this test has been acclaimed by numerous authoritative judges. This is my small contribution towards encouraging a conversation between the Word of God and the Rule.

Verna A. Holyhead, S.G.S.
Melbourne
September 2006

Notes

1. Abraham Heschel, "The Sabbath: Holiness in Time," *Between Man and God: An Interpretation of Judaism* (New York: The Free Press, 1959) 214.
2. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Meaning of Sunday," *Communio* 21, no. 1 (1994) 7.
3. Elizabeth Jennings, "In and Out of Time," *Elizabeth Jennings: New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2002) 313.

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The Season of Advent

In many ways, Advent is a season of contradictions. Chronologically, we are between two calendars: celebrating the beginning of the new church year while turning to the last month of our civil calendars. Socially, we are caught up in the surge of gift finding and gift giving for family and friends, yet as we make our often impatient way through the shopping crowds, we may be tempted to dislike rather than love the rest of elbowing humanity around us!

Even in the flow of the readings for the Sundays of Advent there seems to be a liturgical riptide that, on the First Sunday, drags us out of a logical time sequence to proclaim the second and as yet unrealized coming of Christ at the end of human history, and then tosses us back on a wave of remembrance of the first coming of Emmanuel in our human flesh on the last Sunday of Advent.

The presence of John the Baptist in the Advent liturgy also seems to be contradictory. Quite confident of his messianic proclamation of Jesus at the Jordan on the Second Sunday, by the Third Sunday the Baptist is imprisoned not only by Herod, but also by his own doubts about the identity of “the one who is to come.”

Yet this tension is not meant to pull us apart, but rather to urge us forward, out of the slackness and tiredness of the old church year, toward an eager understanding of the gospel reversals in our lives and the fidelity to us of a God who “reversed” his divinity to share our humanity:

A child so terrified he asks for us.
God is the cry we thought came from our own
Perpetual sense of loss.¹

First Sunday of Advent

• Isa 2:1-5 • Ps 122:1-2, 4-5, 6-9 • Rom 13:11-14 • Matt 24:37-44

T. S. Eliot wrote:

But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation of the saint . . .
For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment²

At the beginning of the liturgical year the church tries to make us more attentive to, hopeful about, and prepared for the moment of the great advent of God: the Second Coming of Christ when human and cosmic history will have run its course and the timeless, eternal kingdom is fully established. God will come to us, but we also must make our pilgrimage to God.

The first reading dreams of the time when all nations and peoples, regardless of nationality, gender, age, or culture, will answer God's invitation to come to him. Obedient to the word of the Lord, the nations will stream to God's dwelling place, symbolized by the city of Jerusalem. The highest point of that city is Mount Zion, the site of the temple, but it is not to attain a strategic advantage over any security threats that the mountain of the temple of the Lord will be significant. What will be won from there is the peace that comes from dwelling with God and obedience to his word, and so in the responsorial Psalm 122, a pilgrim song, we express a longing for our homecoming to God in peace and justice and love.

Outside the United Nations building in New York is a bronze statue entitled "Let Us Beat Swords Into Plowshares," by the Russian sculptor Evgeniy Vuchetich, and presented to the UN by the former Soviet Union. The strong, muscular male figure holds a sword in one hand, and in the other he wields a hammer with which he is beating the sword into a plowshare. At the base of the statue is inscribed the words of Isaiah which we hear today in the first reading: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares."

Our world may seem to be so far from realizing this hope as nations converge in advances of military might or "coalitions against terrorism." To avoid the temptation of again taking up arms that have been laid down after successful peace treaties, these weapons of war must be melted down and beaten into instruments of peace that will enhance, not destroy life, and cultivate, not rape the earth. Isaiah's vision is not one of passive nostalgia. Transplanted into our liturgical assembly, it becomes a call to our active, spiritually "muscular," and social efforts to be peacemakers in a world where

poverty oppresses two-thirds of the world's population, where social inequalities lead to hate and envy and the bitterness that provokes violence against the affluent and arrogant, and where the consequent desperation leads to desperate acts. Our world still waits for radical transformation: for fields that grow crops, not land mines; for the transfiguring light of Christ, not a disfiguring atomic wasteland; for poverty to truly become past history.

Vatican II reminded us that:

The expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some shadowing of the new age.³

In his letter to the Romans, Paul is explicit about the “arms” that Christians should take up. They are the weapons that help us to walk as people of the day, in the light of Christ, as we struggle against the darkness of sin. This was symbolized at our baptism by the presentation of the lighted candle and the accompanying prayer: that the one being baptized may always walk as a child of the light because the flame of Christ's love burns in his or her heart. Translated into contemporary concepts, Paul emphasizes that the “armor” with which we clothe ourselves is a balanced lifestyle, reverent expression of our sexuality, and peaceful relationships with one another.

In the gospel Jesus warns his disciples that they are not to be like the people of Noah's generation who were so immersed in the ordinary and everyday that they were unaware of the flood of evil that was gradually encroaching on their lives. But this does not mean that we go into a pious retreat from life's everyday demands. As the gospel tells us by its own imagery, the fields still have to be plowed, the flour still ground at the mill, but work or leisure or human relationships cannot be so all consuming that we are not alert and committed to the coming of God into our lives. One of the problems of the early church was that, because of the expectation that Jesus' Second Coming (or *parousía*, “appearance”) at the end of human history was just around the corner, Christians might as well do nothing except wait for it—or try to calculate its arrival—a temptation that continues to surface in our own time despite repeated failures! Such passivity is the opposite of the active, discerning vigilance that makes us alert and committed to the daily possibilities of establishing the rule of God in our own life and the lives of others. John XXIII once remarked that if he knew the world was about to end, he would tell the citizens of Vatican City to look busy!—busy with God's work for the kingdom.

In the two mini-parables that Jesus tells, the men working in the field or the women at the mill are outwardly no different, but one is ready for the

kingdom, the other is not. For Matthew, readiness consists in nothing “rapturous,” but in doing the work of God in the spirit of the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12) and the Parable of the Last Judgment (Matt 25:31-46). In another daring image, Jesus compares his coming as Son of Man to a burglary. Any prudent householder who expects to be burgled is on the alert to frustrate the robbery. We are to be alert for the day when Jesus will break into our lives—not to frustrate him, but to allow ourselves to be “stolen” for heaven.

Jesus will come definitively to each one of us at our individual end-time, our death. For the whole of creation, it will be the *eschaton*, the “end time” not so much *of* the world but *for* the world. Individually and cosmically, this will be a new birth, as unimaginable and yet so much more hugely real than the world that awaited us when we were born from our mother’s womb.

During Advent 1968, on December 10, Thomas Merton was accidentally electrocuted in his room while attending a meeting of Asian Benedictines and Cistercians in Bangkok. Twenty years earlier in the poem, “The Victory,” he had written of the sudden coming of the Son of Man as an event of joy, not fear:

. . . make ready for the Face that speaks like lightning,
Uttering the name of your exultation
Deep in the vitals of your soul.
Make ready for the Christ
Whose smile, like lightning,
Sets free the song of everlasting glory
That now sleeps in your paper flesh, like dynamite.⁴

During Advent, our “paper flesh” can often be torn as we plow our way through Christmas shopping or grind through the pressures that the end of the work year demands. But can we find a few moments each Advent week when we “make ready for Christ,” the Son of Man whom the gospel reminds us “is coming at an unexpected hour”? A few minutes daily for the reading of Scripture, a short prayer of gratitude to God for the greatest gift of his Son as we see the enticements of Christmas gifts in shops or on TV, the practiced mindfulness that Jesus comes in our flesh in our sisters and brothers, especially those most in need—these will help us to be ready for his advent. Advent is our reminder that Jesus is coming: daily by grace, liturgically at Christmas, at the unknown time of our own death, and at final birth of the new heaven and earth that will be delivered to God by Christ at the time of his Second Coming.

Second Sunday of Advent

• Isa 11:1-10 • Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17 • Rom 15:4-9 • Matt 3:1-12

During Advent, one strong voice that tries to rouse us to the demands of our discipleship is that of John the Baptist. He comes from the wilderness, eager to share what he has learned there in the privileged place of covenant making and the dangerous environment of temptation to covenant breaking.

In “those days” of new beginnings, the Spirit thrusts John the Baptist onto the banks of the Jordan River to be Israel’s awakener to what God will do in and through Jesus. Sharpened in wisdom and words by his desert experience, John cuts his way through hypocrisy and sinfulness, and offers to the Jordan crowd his baptism of repentance.

Matthew has no infancy introduction to the Baptist. We might be eager for “dear little baby Jesus,” but the Lectionary demands that we first go through “Checkpoint John” to be examined for our integrity, our repentance, our fruits of justice, before we approach the adult Christ. John is not an elegant preacher, not a person of the establishment, not one who would make the most acceptable parishioner. He is disturbing. He had found his voice in the desert’s eloquent silence. Shaggy in dress, he is clothed like a new Elijah (see 2 Kgs 1:8), and eats the ritually pure food of the poor (see Lev 11:22). John’s sudden appearance may be the evangelist’s way of reminding us of one emphasis of last Sunday’s Liturgy of the Word: that God’s action in history is often unexpected. Matthew applies to John the words of consolation of Second Isaiah, originally addressed to the returning Babylonian exiles in the sixth century B.C.E. But whereas Isaiah dreamed of God cutting a smooth way home through the wilderness for his people, in today’s gospel it is the Baptist’s strident and fiery words that blaze a trail for the coming of God-with-us in Christ. The wilderness is not just the physical place in which the Baptist preaches; it is also the barren places of our hearts in which a trail of repentance needs to be cut.

It was at the Jordan River that the Hebrews came out of their wilderness wandering and crossed through the waters into the Promised Land. Over twelve hundred years later, the Baptist calls their descendants into the waters for another transition, another entry into the promises of God. If, in retrospect, the calendar year which is almost finished seems to have been something of a desert wandering—personally, politically, socially and ecclesially—Advent is a call to new hope and conversion to Christ. The biblical meaning of “repentance” to which John summons us is much more than just “being sorry.” It implies a radical change in our attitudes and

matters of the heart, a total transformation of our priorities, the beginning and end of all in us that is not God.

The Pharisees and Sadducees slither around the fringes of the crowd like a brood of dangerous vipers, sizing up John, ready to inject some of their poison into those who accept the Baptist—who certainly does not fit their establishment profile. The same judgmental attitudes can always assail Christian leaders (see Matt 7:15-20). With sharp and ironic word play, John deflates the attitudes of the religious leaders about what they consider their privileged religious status, proclaiming that God can, with inexhaustible creativity, turn stones (Hebrew *ebenim*) into children (*benim*) of Abraham! We cannot put our trust in our own achievements, our own virtues, our own culture, and exclude others from God's love. To be true to the Advent mystery, which John announces, the axe of conversion has to be laid to the roots of any arrogant superiority or intolerance in our hearts.

St. Augustine reminded us that John was a voice for a time, but Christ is the Word for all eternity. John has no illusions about his own status. He considers himself to be the servant of the coming Messiah, a person not even worthy to perform the menial job of a slave who carries his master's smelly and dusty sandals. Although Jesus' ministry begins after John's, he precedes the Baptist in importance. Jesus' baptism, says John, will be with the Holy Spirit and with fire, a symbolic way of speaking of purification and refinement. Jesus will be the Harvester of the end time who will winnow humanity. The redeemed will be like the substantial kernels of wheat that, when tossed into the air by the farmer's fork, fall to the ground for harvesting, while those who are not repentant will be blown away like useless chaff.

In the first reading, Isaiah proclaims that the axe has been laid to the tree of Jesse. In the divine plan, a king was to be a "sacrament" of justice, as the responsorial Psalm 72 sings of him. He was charged by God to be the servant of his people, the one who "delivers the poor when they call, the poor and those who have no helper." For the most part, however, the Davidic kingship descended from David, son of Jesse, had been neither healthy nor vigorous in its growth and commitment to the disadvantaged. Yet the prophet believes that, like the charred and ravaged trees swept by bushfires, there persists in its root a tiny sprig of hope and life. When watered and tended by the Spirit, this will one day bud forth a king who will inaugurate a reign of holy, human, and ecological harmony. Advent is the season for our pondering on what this peaceable kingdom could be like, and also for our striving, first of all, to make our own hearts a place where lion and lamb can lie down together. This demands that we try to live as welcoming,

forgiving people toward those who are “bestly” enemies, and take care ourselves to do no harm to those who are as vulnerable as little children.

It is to such a program of practical, everyday action that Paul calls us in his Letter to the Romans. We are encouraged to hold fast to hope by the stories of how our ancestors endured, stories which we encounter in our prayerful reading of Scripture. To be tolerant of others is a great challenge that, when met with love, gives glory to God. It is regrettable that the Lectionary reading does not start three verses earlier with Paul’s plea that his Roman Christians, who do consider themselves strong in faith, need to be accepting of the failings of those who are weaker in their commitment.

Perhaps all the talk about peace, about the light of Christ, and the joy of his coming may seem irrelevant when we experience darkness and fear, especially the darkness of a loss of faith in God, ourselves, or other people. But Sunday after Sunday during the four weeks of Advent we light a candle on the Advent wreath—a fragile flame that reminds us that in these weeks we are preparing to renew the welcome into our lives of the vulnerable One who was announced by a star rising in the darkness and a song echoing through the night. Jesus still comes when we seem to be starved of stars and can find little to sing about. Then, in faith, we can rejoice.

A woman who is both a mother and a theologian made this timely comment:

The readings of the Second Sunday of Advent remind me of a sense of concern which pervaded pregnancy for me. It was a concern about the world into which my child would be born. It was a peace wish and a justice wish that made me think (and I still think) that if we mothers . . . black, white, yellow . . . if all of us would unite and tell the makers of war that we resent and will not tolerate any force that tries to undo what we have knitted together so patiently in the womb for nine months—if we did that, I believe that we would ensure peace from generation to generation. By extension, if we as members of a pregnant mystical body of Christ did this, made known our concerns by our seeds of justice and deeds of peacemaking, the promise of the Second Sunday of Advent would come true . . . Advent is the only future worth waiting for.⁵

Third Sunday of Advent

• Isa 35:1-6a, 10 • Ps 146:6-10 • James 5:7-10 • Matt 11:2-11

It is the experience of many prison chaplains that when prisoners are on death row they frequently—and understandably—ask life and death questions that would never have occurred to them before. Almost two thousand years ago, Matthew describes the poignant questions that John

asks of Jesus through the messengers he has sent to him from Herod's prison. Doubts breed in loneliness and darkness, and they take John a long way from his confident self whom we met in last Sunday's gospel on Jordan's banks. With desperate hope, John sends his disciples with the question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus' response echoes the Baptist's own convictions that we heard him voice last week: it is by their fruits that the man or woman of the kingdom is recognized. Jesus reminds John's messengers about the fruits of his own ministry. Jesus has harvested the blind who see again, the lame who now dance for joy, the lepers who can again kiss their loved ones, the deaf who are startled by a bird song, the dead who are raised to life. Take this good news to John, says Jesus.

As the Baptist's disciples depart, Jesus turns to the crowd to praise John in terms that would make an excellent Advent review of life for us. John was not a vacillating crowd pleaser, not a reed that bends in the wind of public opinion. He was not a compromiser, not a well-dressed and powerful "in-group" person, not a political entrepreneur or someone welcome at prestigious places like Herod's palace. Where John did end up was in Herod's prison, and there he would lose his head, but never his heart, to that king's lack of integrity and fear of losing face. John's heart had been lost long ago to Jesus, and no doubt the message sent back to him in prison confirmed John in his love and offered him the truth that the way to deep faith so often goes through deep doubt. At least, to some degree, do we measure up to such praise—or blame?

The prophets had strong faith in the transformation that God could work in the barren physical and spiritual wilderness, and throughout the weeks of Advent in Year A, Isaiah sings and dreams of the transformation that God's coming will work. Just as Israel came through the long wilderness wandering to enter into the Promised Land, so God will again lead his people out of the desert of apathy and despair. Creation will be healed, and the wasteland of human disabilities, fears, disappointments and oppression will blossom into joy when watered by God's grace. Isaiah is speaking from experience; he has been through humiliation, slavery, and exile, but he assures us that we must keep on dreaming—not as people of the night who wake to find their dreams are fleeting and insubstantial, but as dangerous daytime dreamers who act with open eyes, unsealed ears, and embodied resolve to make their dreams of the reign of God a reality. John the Baptist was such a dangerous, practical dreamer.

With the responsorial psalm, verses from Psalm 146, we sing our faith in God who brings justice to those in greatest need. Isaiah never saw this

God take flesh in Jesus, but he believed in his spirit-filled dream. The antiphon that is our response repeats the words of Isaiah as again and again we insist: “Lord, come and save us.”

James tells us in his letter that growth and harvest do not happen overnight. Just as a farmer works hard to prepare his fields for sowing and then must wait patiently for rains over which he has no control, so Christians have to work at their discipleship, knowing that it is God who gives the increase. We must endure as nonjudgmental people of hope and love who wait for the advent of the only just Judge. The longer the Harvester’s delay, the more enduring our patience must be. We need the season of Advent to sow again in the field of our hearts the sure hope of our salvation in the face of helplessness and distress.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

• Isa 7:10-14 • Ps 24:1-6 • Rom 1:1-7 • Matt 1:18-24

Sawing the wood,
the splinters hacked at his heart.
Hammering the nails,
her revelation pounded at his peace.
Carting the timber,
he was loaded still with love.
Splicing the joints,
he put together a private plan.
Dreaming in the night,
he awoke to fearless fatherhood.
. . . And he named him Jesus.⁶

This is Matthew’s Joseph who comes to center stage as the Advent drama moves into the final act. Matthew gives us no account of an annunciation to Mary, but recounts the angel’s dream revelation to the agonizing Joseph: that the child Mary has conceived is “from the Holy Spirit.” How Joseph had learned of Mary’s pregnancy we are not told. We may speculate whether it was from Mary herself, or through sharp-eyed village gossip about “women’s business.” However it happened, Joseph is torn between his loyalty to the Jewish Torah and his love for his young wife.

Mary is truly his wife, not a pregnant, unwed teenager as some homilists preach with zeal for the “religion” of contemporary cultural relevance but with ignorance of biblical interpretation or first century Jewish culture. The confusion is heightened by the translation of “betrothed” as “engaged” in

some versions. Betrothal was, by Jewish law, the first stage of marriage, a legal agreement that bestowed on the couple the status of man and wife. Since Jewish girls were legally and frequently married at an early age, as young as twelve, they continued to live at their parental home for about a year. After this time of adjustment to their new status, a husband would take his wife to his own home to cohabit with him. Further proof that the betrothed were married are the facts that betrothal could be terminated only by death, after which the remaining spouse was considered widowed, or by the man divorcing his wife. Any infidelity on the woman's part during betrothal was regarded as adultery. The strong honor code of the Middle Eastern world demanded that no man could take possession of what belonged to another, including a child in the womb who had been conceived by another man. Joseph had his dreams of married life, but then comes the nightmare, and the painful, human agony of a just man torn between his loyalty to the Jewish Torah (law) and his love for Mary—pregnant, but not by him—and therefore considered an adulteress who could possibly be stoned, or at least subjected to public humiliation (Deut 22:23-24).

But Matthew describes Joseph as a just man, who plans to make some attempt to reconcile steadfast love and law. With deep unease in his soul, perhaps remembering the prophets had proclaimed “mercy, not sacrifice” (Hos 6:6), Joseph decides to divorce Mary quietly to spare her as much public shame as possible. Such an attitude is an overture to the mercy that Jesus will show in his interpretation of the Law (see Matt 9:13, 23:23), and surely a reminder to the church of all ages to listen to the echo of the prophetic words.

In a dream, a messenger of God tells Joseph not to be afraid of what he cannot understand, not to disown the mystery but enter into it. Joseph wakes up and succeeds where we often fail: he does something about his dream. Obedient to God's word, he responds for the first of many times “as it was commanded” (Matt 2:14, 21, 22). This biblical dreamer is also a person of action. Joseph offers the hospitality of his love and lineage to Mary and to the Stranger Child whom she carries in her womb. He is the radically blessed poor man, ready to surrender the right to choose a name for the child, and generously offering to Jesus, “he who saves,” a paternity not of his own flesh. What onlookers might consider a scandal, Joseph and Mary believe is the action of the Holy Spirit, who continues to do “scandalous” things in our midst.

Joseph is cast by Matthew along the lines of another Joseph, the patriarch of Genesis, who was also a man of dreams (Gen 37, 40) and a man of God's providence (Gen 45:1-15). Out of the granaries of Egypt over

which he was the Pharaoh's chief steward, Joseph cared for his family in time of famine, despite their treatment of him as a young man (Gen 37:15-36). The Joseph of the gospel also cares unobtrusively for his family, stewarding the Grain and the Bread which continues to feed our hunger at every eucharistic assembly.

In the thirteenth-century cathedral of Chartres are four stained-glass windows known as the Evangelists' Windows. In each one, an evangelist is depicted as sitting on the shoulders of an Old Testament prophet. Matthew sits on Isaiah's shoulders. If we sit on someone's shoulders we can see more than the one who carries us. It was impossible for Isaiah in the eighth century B.C.E. to see Jesus as Emmanuel, God-with-us. On the other hand, without Isaiah, Matthew would not have been able to search the Hebrew Scriptures for the Spirit-filled words which would be a fitting vehicle with which to carry the good news of the long-awaited Messiah's advent to his predominantly Jewish-Christian community. Matthew's purpose in the use of such texts is to share with his community his conviction that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hopes. As Eugene Boring comments, "What Matthew's use of Scripture reflects is not apologetics addressed to outsiders, but confession directed to insiders."⁷ Every generation uses contemporary approaches to biblical interpretation, and Matthew uses a subtle and sophisticated Jewish method that accepted an adaptation of an earlier text to fit more closely with its fulfillment. Matthew looks back to the messianic hopes of the Old Testament and forward to the consequences of their fulfillment in Christ for the Christian community. In today's first reading we hear the Isaian verse that is the first of many such Old Testament references.

In contrast to Joseph, King Ahaz is far from being a "just" man; he is, rather, a reflection of the political expediency and spurious virtue that can still be found too often in society and church, as well as in ourselves. Challenged by Isaiah to rely on the providence and covenant fidelity of God to the royal house of David to which Ahaz belongs, and not an alliance of convenience with Assyria, Ahaz parades false piety and lame excuses before the prophet. Isaiah realizes that the king does not want any sign from God that might demand change and conversion. Life is more comfortable (many politicians still seem to agree!) if he stays with his own preconceived ideas. With just anger at Ahaz's stubbornness, Isaiah does offer him a God-given sign: not a sign of military might, but the frail sign of a young pregnant woman, probably a princess in Ahaz's own house, whose child will be "Emmanuel," enfleshing God's continuing promise and presence to the royal and messianic line of Judah. As parents know, every child is a sign of hope, announcing that God is still with us.

To this reading we respond with some verses of Psalm 24, a psalm probably recited at the entrance to the Temple as a reminder of what should characterize those who come to worship before God, the Lord of glory. What is required are the clean hands of the peaceful and nonviolent and the purity of heart that is an unreserved commitment to God. Such worshippers seek to have their priorities right with regard to God and other people. Joseph is surely such a person; Ahaz is not. What about each one of us at worship this Sunday? In these terms, are we fit to enter into the house of God?

The promise of the Emmanuel who is born of Mary is now an abiding promise with us “always, to the end of the age.” These are the last words of Matthew’s Good News, spoken by the Risen Jesus (Matt 28:20).

The beginning of Paul’s Letter to the Romans gathers together many of the themes of the first reading and the gospel. In Christ Jesus, God has been faithful to his promises to the house of David; in human powerlessness, God reveals the divine power and wisdom; and Paul, both a proud Hebrew and a citizen of Rome, has no hesitation in glorying in his role of “slave” of Jesus because it is his apostolic mission to proclaim that Jesus is not only his Lord but the Lord of all peoples and nations. All this is the work of the “scandalous” Spirit. Through baptism into Christ, every Christian is called by the Spirit to be Christ’s slave, not in cowering subservience, but with wholehearted freedom and integrity. From this identity flows our mission to proclaim the gospel and serve our sisters and brothers in the grace and peace of Christ.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Jennings, “Christmas Suite in Five Movements,” *New Collected Poems* (London: Carcanet Press Limited, 2002) 143.
2. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004) 190.
3. Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, art. 39.
4. Thomas Merton, “The Victory,” *A Man in the Divided Sea* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1946) 88.
5. Doris Donnelly, “Advent, The Most Difficult Season,” *Origins* (September 10, 1987): 209.
6. Author’s own words.
7. Eugene Boring, “Matthew,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 153.