

Homily 4th Sunday in Advent, 2025

‘We cannot shop at the supermarket of faith, only picking and choosing what is convenient to us. Blind adherence to burdensome man-made laws is the biggest obstacle to the living out of authentic Christian discipleship.’ (John Reagan, The Potter’s Wheel, 2025)

I recall, back in the late 50s or early 60s, a young unmarried woman in my neighbourhood became pregnant. People harshly, began to gossip, judging her and calling her all sorts of names behind her back. When the baby was born people would walk by her in the street, ignoring her very existence, an unfortunate judgemental attitude of those times. People speculated about the father of the child but there was no certainty as to his identity. People didn’t quite stone her but did rob her of any human dignity. Catholics were some of the most judgemental and didn’t hold back with their sweeping accusations.

Mary was probably about 14 years of age when she became pregnant by The Holy Spirit. Nazareth was a very small village in the early first century — not a large town or city. According to Biblical scholars and archaeologists the population was probably between 200 and 500 people so news travelled quickly and there would certainly have been gossip, judgement and condemnation of Anne and Joachim’s daughter. The slightly older Joseph, Mary’s betrothed, would surely also have been the butt of much unmerited abuse and scathing judgement.

Yet Isaiah, almost 800 years before had referred to the ‘virgin who will give birth to a son, who would be called Emmanuel - God is with Us. Whether the ‘prophecy’ referred to the future Messiah is debated by some*. Ahaz, the King at the time was an evil and idolatrous king who promoted Baal worship along with worship of Yahweh. He also reconstituted the pagan practice of child sacrifice to Baal/Molech by sacrificing his own son. Hezekiah (716-687 BC) his successor, unlike his father, was a good king and faithful to Yahweh. He listened to Isaiah and upon assuming the throne he immediately took steps to eradicate idolatry from the land of Judah and promoted devotion to Yahweh in a way the people had not seen in many decades.

Most Jews of the time of Christ’s birth, even the poorest, would have been aware of Isaiah’s ‘prophecy’ but gossip and judgement were the preferred choice for most people over the ‘prophecy’ that Mary might be the mother of The Messiah. Joseph was certainly unsure and probably confused by Mary’s news. St Matthew writes in the opening chapter of his Gospel, ‘Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.... When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife.’

So let’s now consider the case: a fourteen year old gets pregnant; she claims that an angel visited her and told her she was pregnant by The Holy Spirit; her fiancé denies any part in the pregnancy; he decides to ‘divorce’ her secretly to save her from public shame; an angel appears to him in his sleep and tells him to not fear but to take the girl as his wife ‘for that which is conceived in her is from The Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the pregnancy was foretold centuries previously by a prophet. Yes, this is our faith despite it being (according to the rationalists in the realms of fantasy ‘an opium for the people’) that Jesus, Son of God and Son of The Virgin Mary is born TODAY. It is He who is ‘God with Us’ (Emmanuel), The Saviour of the world.

That same Jesus, born in a stable at Bethlehem, during his public ministry was faced with a crowd about to stone a woman caught in the act of adultery. He began doodling in the sand, looked up and said, 'Whoever hasn't sinned cast the first stone. ', in the words of the evangelist, 'from the eldest they walked away'. Jesus then utters the merciful and liberating words, 'These do not condemn you and neither do I. Go and sin no more.' No judgement, no condemnation but unqualified mercy and forgiveness and a reintegration of the woman into the community.

Today, WE must choose, either to be totally on the side of THIS merciful and forgiving Jesus or against Him. There is no middle way. If we are on Jesus' side, our faith must be consistently expressed in our actions, no judging, no condemnation, no gossip only uncompromising COMPASSION and unconditional LOVE.

* Pope Pius VI condemned any interpretation denying the messianic prophecy of Jesus' coming in (Isaiah 7:14) in 1779. When the Hebrew word *almah* is used in the Old Testament it is never used for a woman who is sexually experienced and is only used to describe a young, unmarried woman of marriageable age (Edward Sri, *Queen Mother: A Biblical Theology of Mary's Queenship*, pp. 54-55; 140-41