

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

We are now at the Fourth Sunday of Advent. All of our coloured candles lit, and in a few days' time we will light the Christ candle as we celebrate Christmas Day. This is such a wonderful time, with the growing sense of expectation, but we must be patient a little longer. Let's still wait and watch, and enjoy the few days we have remaining in this season of Advent.

Advent is a season of prophecy, so it is no surprise that we heard the words of the Prophet Isaiah today. The passage from the book of the Prophet Isaiah has an interesting prophecy for us to consider. It speaks of the coming of the Immanuel, 'God with us', and it says this: "He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good."

It is a remarkable prophecy. It speaks of the Immanuel as one who, even at the most tender age, is able to discern good from evil and choose good. If we interpret Jesus to be the fulfilment of this prophecy, we encounter one who embodies both goodness, and the wisdom to choose the path of goodness and to reject the path of evil.

This is an important lesson for us. As Christians, we look to Jesus as someone who demonstrated the wisdom of God, and teaches us to follow in his footsteps. We are therefore called to recognise our capacity to do both good and evil, and to choose the path of goodness.

One of the challenges of human existence is the knowledge of good and evil. It burdens us with choice and knowledge. The choice of our words and actions, and the knowledge that they have repercussions – both positive and negative. Thank God that we have Jesus as our example and our guide, and one who consistently chose the path of goodness, trod it faithfully, and invites us to do likewise in our own life. We may not always get it right, but we have someone who encourages us along the way, and understands the hard work that it is to live, and to seek to do good. And at a time where some are driven by fear and hatred towards others, we must continue to follow Christ's example of love and compassion.

As part of the penitential part of our Advent journey, let us pray that we will continue to reflect, and to choose goodness over evil, and look to the good in others too.

The Gospel reading allows us to focus on Joseph for a while. From what we read in the Gospel, I think it is clear that he was a good and noble man.

When Mary's pregnancy became known, Joseph was "unwilling to expose her to public disgrace" and "planned to dismiss her quietly". This goes against the culture of the time where she could have been subjected to public humiliation, charges of immorality, and she could even face a public stoning as a consequence. Joseph cared for Mary so much that he was willing to ensure her safety even as he considered ending their engagement. This, to me, speaks of his character and integrity.

Then, while he dreams, an angel appears to allay his fears, saying: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife ...”. The angel explains Jesus is the salvation of all humankind – saving people from their sins, and that he is the fulfilment of long-held prophecy. Just as Mary heard from Gabriel as to all that Jesus would do and be, Joseph also receives this news.

Fortunately, Joseph is as faithful to God as Mary is, and he is willing to listen and to accept the angel’s words. When he wakes, he does not dismiss Mary, but remains with her, supporting her and caring for her not only until she delivers her child, but for a long time after.

Both Mary and Joseph receive good news from their angelic visitors, and accept their role as Jesus’ human parents. Their love and compassion will be instrumental in raising Jesus from those vulnerable first hours through his infancy and childhood and into adulthood.

This whole story speaks to me about the nature of love, and of attachment.

Joseph’s love for Mary allowed him to treat her with compassion and empathy when others may have sought retribution for a perceived slight to their reputation. It also meant that he cared for the infant Jesus as if he were his own flesh and blood, protecting him from the threat of Herod’s violence, and ensuring his safety during those vulnerable early years.

Joseph chooses this path of love, and it is wonderful that he does. Singer-songwriter Greg Holgate expressed the breadth of human connection in a song lyric, which says: “Family trees don't need be organic. The branches you graft are as equally valid.” Joseph’s willingness to graft Jesus into his family tree is a perfect example of such affection, and shows us that love is what brings us together, not heredity. After all, we were all grafted into God’s family tree, through Christ, and we have been welcomed into that divine family. Thanks be to God.

So, my prayer for us all in these final days of Advent is that we will continue to be people who cultivate what is good, who stand for those things which are noble and right, and who encourage others to do likewise. Let us remember that the connections between us are precious, and to strengthen them through love, compassion, empathy and grace.

If we do, we will be able to say that our Advent journey is one which has allowed us to grow, and to see the presence and work of God around us, and within us.

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The Fourth Sunday in Advent
21 December 2025