

*The maiden will conceive and will bear a son,
and she shall call him*

IMMANUEL - GOD WITH US



Diocese of Ballarat

ADVENT STUDY NOTES

2007

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

These study notes can be used by individuals for private study but are better suited for use in a discussion group. There are no right or wrong answers, for the questions are designed to encourage a reflection on the text at hand as well as an examination of our faith lives, as individual followers of Christ as well as faith communities.

Suggestions:

- Make sure that all members of the discussion group have the booklet well in advance and encourage them to read through the material before coming to the session.
- Allow plenty of time for the group to explore the commentary on the text under study. Read it through at the beginning to make sure it is fresh in their minds. It is often helpful to see if there are any initial reactions to the text before going further into it.
- Using different bible translations is always good as it opens up new possibilities.
- Remember that everyone's insight has value, even when we think it is wrong. There is no text of scripture that is beyond ambiguity! What it means to one person can open up new possibilities for others.

Practical advice:

- Always start and end your sessions with a time of prayer, for what we are doing is God's work and we need to allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit and possibly surprised by the Spirit.
- Linking the study with some kind of refreshment is always a good idea. This could be in the context of a shared meal or simply refreshment when people arrive and a cuppa before they go home.
- All those attending should invite a friend. Shoulder tap and go to people who have perhaps wandered away from the Church or who have not been a part of the Church but may be interested in seeking a way in. Advertise what is happening. Bring people in and providing that the group is friendly, tolerant and patient, they will probably stay.
- Have a group leader who is able to steer the discussion and keep it more or less focused on the texts under study. No one, especially the leader, should dominate the discussion or people will soon turn off. Everyone should be encouraged to contribute.

Finally:

- Always end with the diocesan mission prayer for it reminds us that we are renewing ourselves as the whole Body of Christ in this part of God's vineyard.

Making something of our Advent season

Advent is a wonderful spiritual opportunity for all believers. All too often, it is passed over as we have our eyes fixed on Christmas. Yet it is impossible to fully celebrate the birth of the Messiah unless we feel that we have the need of a Messiah who will come into our world to free us from our human sins and limitations. We are called at this time of the year to pause, to tune more honestly into the call of God in our lives and to examine and reflect upon our response to his vocation. As disciples of Christ, baptized into his Kingdom, we need to try and sort out whether or not our lives reflect our statements of faith. Are we really who we say we are?

But we have Advent every year!

The great feasts of the Church's calendar come around every year and remain unchanged. However, we are not like that. We have changed. Our life is one of continual growth and change. It happens all around us and we are today not the people we were last Christmas. We are older, hopefully wiser and a little more faith filled, hope driven and living lives characterized by charity. We then come into this festival with new insights and experiences and so the gift of Christmas offers us new possibilities and the chance of new directions - if we are prepared.

The Lord is coming:

Advent means the "coming" of the Lord. It is a season that focuses on the arrival of Jesus Christ into our lives (though clearly not for the first time). He came to us as a baby in Bethlehem and that changed creation forever. But we are now focusing on his mystical return as the Lord of the universe, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, who is coming to judge the living and the dead. That is not something we like to think too much about but the season does remind us that it is a reality that is already on its way, though we know not the hour nor the day. But there is another coming, the coming of Jesus in grace. He comes to us in the Scriptures, in the Eucharist; speaks to us in our conscience, comes to us through the lives of our brothers and sisters in faith and comes to us in a special way in the poor and the needy, the outcasts, the strangers, those in prison and all who suffer and are alone.

Advent: Be prepared!

And so the Advent message is about making sure we are ready to greet the Lord, in all of the varied ways of his arrival in our lives. It is therefore a time of penance and of joyful expectation. Without penance and a determined attempt to explore what it is God is demanding of us, there is no chance of us being prepared. There are parts of our lives that need refreshing and renewal. We need to be forgiven our sins and failings and to seek God's grace for the coming year of discipleship. If the Lord returned tomorrow, riding on a cloud and with his angels around him, would we go forward to meet him with joy, confident of our lives of faithful discipleship? If he speaks to us tomorrow in a chance encounter with a stranger, or an enemy or one of the poor and needy in our city, will we hear what it is he is saying to us? When we are making important (or even mundane) decisions about what we are going to do, will we be open to listening to his voice or will our own noises and desires drown him out? That is why we need Advent.

This Advent study:

This Advent study simply takes us through the Church's calendar of readings for the Sundays of Advent. The notes and suggested discussion points are designed to assist us to reflect upon what it means to be a disciple. Collectively and individually, they will hopefully encourage us to examine our lives as disciples, to acknowledge our failures and our sins, to confess our sins to Almighty God and to recommit ourselves to exploring renewed Gospel directions in our lives. We can follow these studies as individuals, as family groups, neighbourhood gatherings or in parish study sessions. But we are also doing them as the whole of the family of God which is the Church in this diocese, for the Church will only be renewed when all God's faithful people allow themselves to be renewed by the Spirit.

Enjoy these studies. Allow them to lead you where the Spirit wants and so prepare for our Lord's coming

+Michael Ballarat

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT:

Come, let us go up to the Mountain of the Lord...Isaiah 2:1-5

Who was Isaiah?

Isaiah is going to be a regular companion on our journey through Advent and it will help to have some insight into what makes him tick and something of an outline of the book itself.

Isaiah of 1-39 wrote between 740 and 700 BC in the northern kingdom. He had seen the nation go through some horrendous times which included the end of the Israel. He wrote of God's great plan for the whole of creation and spoke of the need for justice.

Isaiah 40-55 was written during the sixth century BC and was written from among the exiles in Babylon. He offers hope by speaking of what God is about to do for the people and how as Lord of history he will bring them home to their own land. For him, God is a redeeming God.

Isaiah 56-66 was written in Palestine after the people had returned to the land. The author is very critical of the sins of Israel and is quite pessimistic about the possibility of the people repenting and living lives of faithful obedience to God. He promises that if the people do repent they will live under the blessings of Yahweh their God and know long and lasting peace.

This short section was probably written after the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in 587 and speaks of a future hope for all who live in Judah and the City of God. It is placed here, before the prophet outlines the message of judgment that is about to take place. It is as if he is reassuring them: *Yes, hard times are coming but God is a faithful God and through it all he will be leading you to where he wants you to be so that you can fulfill the mission to which you have been called as a people.* In other words, stop looking at the difficulties and struggles and keep your eye on the Lord your God!

The mountain of Jerusalem: Mount Zion is not a high mountain but its role in world history is founded in mythical images. The ancients believed in a mountain that stood at the centre of the world that joined heaven and earth. It was a mountain that effected the destiny of all nations and peoples and the prophet is saying that in the future, beyond the destructive judgment, the City of the Living God would have this role. This must have been hard to see as they looked around at the dangers and destruction that was all around them.

all the nations... This is an amazing insight by the prophet. Here he is talking about a world wide reign of God that will bring peace to all peoples. The vision God has is a vision for all peoples and not just for the Hebrews.

that he may teach us his ways... what the prophet has in mind is some kind of a new Davidic kingdom that will govern according to the law of God and all those living under this rule will experience a just and lasting peace. He is reminding them that God has a plan for the whole of creation.

and they shall beat their swords... On this Mountain of the Lord, it is God who will judge between peoples and as God is the judge, the old ways of using war to settle disputes will be put aside forever. They can be turned into instruments of farming and for building up the community instead of destroying it.

O House of Jacob come... We need to add verse five as it is here that see the first call to repentance. If the people of Judah wish to live in the peace of God's reign, they must first of all repent and return to him. While Micah 4:4 speaks of blessings coming to individuals, Isaiah has in mind the transformation of the whole of the nation and indeed, the entire creation. But, this is only possible if and when they are prepared to turn from their ways of sin and return to the ways of Yahweh their God.

God makes a difference: Here we find the first faith challenge. We are called upon, like the Hebrews of old, to believe that God can and will make a difference to our own lives and the world. Having a divine dimension to all that we do will change what we do and impact upon the results of our action (or inaction). Can we believe that God has that kind of influence on our lives? Is God powerfully at work in creation and history? How does he do that? How do we experience it working?

The end of the world

To talk about the end of the world is to risk being laughed at and likened to those odd characters walking round with sandwich boards warning that *the end is nigh!* Yet, it is a reality with which we ought to deal and occasionally reflect upon. This applies both to our own personal end (death) and the end of the whole of creation.

Certainly for the first couple of centuries, it was a most significant part of what shaped the Church's understanding of itself and its mission and ministry. If you thought Jesus was returning tomorrow, you would change the way you live today. If the return was thought to be a long way off into the future, you would shape your life and the Church in a very different way. That is what happened.

While there is no single understanding of the end in the New Testament, some standard beliefs can be summarized. Jesus will return and when he comes he will do so with great power and will bring to a final end the reign of evil. This is most powerfully shown in the images of the Book of Revelation (eg: 17:14).

Paul speaks of a reign of Christ that will continue until he has put all of his enemies under his feet (1 Cor 15:25). There will be an end to the demonic powers and the powers that have been in conflict with Christ from the beginning. It is only when this has finally happened that the end will come. Then Christ will hand over the Kingdom to his Father and the eternal reign of God begins (1 Cor 15:24; Rev 5:10; 22:5).

What happens after death? The Bible is quite divided on this and sometimes positions are put forward that appear to be in conflict (eg: an immediate judgment in Luke 16:22ff and a judgment at the end of days in Luke 13:28). About the only clear belief in the New Testament is that death is not the end. It is because of the resurrection from the death of Jesus that all men and women have hope of an eternal life beyond the grave. While the bible speaks in various ways about a judgment and the possibilities of being punished and/or rewarded, its chief intention was to speak of the promises that were on offer and to call the faithful to repent of their sins that they may avoid eternal pain and live, instead, in lasting Peace.

24:37-44

37...the point of comparison here is time. The people of the time of Noah did not expect the flood. It was a surprise to them and by the time they realized what was happened, it was too late and they drowned. They continued on as if nothing was amiss, when all around them the waters were rising. Too late!

39...That is what it will be like when the Son of Man returns. People will have ignored all of the warnings that are given. They will pretend it is not happening and they will go to their doom, denying it to the end.

40...Matthew reminds his people that the coming will cause divisions. The two men in the field look the same but one is of the Kingdom and he is saved and the other is not and he is doomed. They are doing the same things but live in very different spiritual universes.

42...Stay awake! Because we do not know the exact time of the Lord's return, the only proper and sensible response is to be prepared. Constant vigilance should be the mark of the men and women of faith.

43...The comparison used by Matthew here is clear. If the owner of the house knew what time the thief was coming, he would respond by being on guard and awake when he broke into the house. And so with the coming of the Son of Man. Ongoing watchfulness is the mark of the disciple. Every moment must be seen as the moment when the Son of Man will appear on the clouds with his angels.

Stay awake! Be on guard! Be watchful! These are all key parts of Matthew's message to his people. But what do they mean for us in our daily lives as disciples? What are the chief characteristics of *watchfulness*? What are the signs of our *staying awake*? What would be the signs that a disciple had *gone to sleep*? How can we grow in our *watchfulness*?

The Coming of the Son of Man:

The early community, influenced by Jewish traditions, understood that the end would involve the coming of the Son of Man, a figure identified with Jesus (Matt 24:3, 27,37,39). The Hebrews had long sought to try and calculate the time of this end, something familiar to us from the Book of Daniel. There the time to the end (when Antiochus Epiphanes would set up abominable worship in the Temple) is measured as a time, two times and a half a time (7:25). It is 2,300 evenings and mornings or 1,150 days (8:13). It is also three and a half years (9:27), 1,290 days (12:11) and 1,334 days (12:12). These all speak of about three and a half years and reflect the anxiety of the people as they sought to anticipate the terrible end that would come as a result of this evil action by the pagan king. These attempts at calculating time continued on through Jewish theological circles down into the Christian era and are reflected also in Christian writings. Knowing when the end will come is of great importance when there is a judgment attached to it!

But, as we see in 2 Peter 3:3-4, there was also skepticism about the usefulness of such calculations. This is what happens when there are great expectations expressed about the immanent end but the end does not come. It gradually became clear that all of these things would not happen in this present generation as perhaps had been expected (Matt 24:34). This would have been of some great embarrassment to the early Christian community and it is quite possible, that what Matthew is trying to address here is the scoffing that comes from outside of the circle of believers (the comments in 2 Peter seem to arise as stinging criticisms of the early believers from their Jewish antagonists).

Hence, in this passage, Matthew is moving away from any calculation of time and urging his Church to focus instead on watchfulness. He is reminding them (and perhaps responding to his non-Christian mockers) that no one knows when the Son of Man will be returning. He did not give an indication of the timing of his return. His coming will be quite unexpected, as was the flood in the time of Noah. So, how should a disciple respond in this kind of situation? They should be ever vigilant. They should be watchful and it is according to their level of watchfulness that they will experience judgment.

Matthew thus achieved for the Church the development of a notion of ethics—how should we be living in the time between the resurrection and the coming of the Son of Man (called the *parousia*)? Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means that we have clear responsibilities to fulfill in this interim period. We cannot simply sit back and await a return that could happen tomorrow or in a million years time. We have a vocation to complete and it is on our willingness to take up and engage in that vocation that we will be judged.

What is it that God asks of a follower of Jesus Christ? - the demands of discipleship.

The answer to the question: *What does God expect of us?* is important. But it is essential that we answer it in terms of what Jesus has told us God wants and not in terms of a way of discipleship with which we might have become comfortable over time. Advent is a good time to take ourselves back to the Gospels and see if we can rediscover what it means to be a baptized follower of the Lord.

This can come as a bit of a shock to some Anglicans—the whole notion of being expected to be living in a particular way. Being a Christian means a great deal more than the avoidance of sin. Throughout the duration of his ministry, Jesus spelt out for us a series of expectations that he and his Father have of those who seek to follow him in the way of the Kingdom.

The roadmap to discipleship:

The way of discipleship is the biblical way. In terms of our salvation, there can be no other binding set of directions for the Christian. We are bible-obeying people, responding in our daily living to the demands of God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ his only Son. Read through the table on the next page. See if you can work out what the demands of Jesus might mean in your life and the life of your parish.

DISCOVERING THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

<u>Some of what Jesus actually said:</u>	What does this mean for <u>me/my Church?</u>	Matt
Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand. →		4:17
You are salt of the earth, don't lose your flavour. →		5:13
You are light to the world, shine for others →		5:14
Give alms →		5:14
Pray →		5:1ff
Forgive others their failings →		6:14f
Store up treasures in heaven →		6:19f
Do not be a slave of money. Be a slave of God. →		6:24
Set your heart first of all on the Kingdom. →		6:25f
Do not judge, First take the plank out of your own eye. →		7:1ff
Ask, search and knock and your Father will respond. →		7:12
Treat others as you would like to be treated. →		7:12
Produce good fruit and not bad fruit. →		7:15f
Listen to the words of Jesus and act on them. →		7:21ff
Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it. →		10:37
Come to me all who labour...shoulder my yoke →		11:28
A disciple must renounce himself/herself take up his/her cross and follow after me. →		16:24f
Make yourself like a child. →		18:5ff
Where two or three meet in my name, there am I. →		18:19
Go therefore make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all of my commands. →		28:18f

Each of the Gospels has its own set of instructions and only by working through each of them will we end up with a full outline of the expectations that Jesus has of us. Try looking at both Mark and Luke and when you have compiled the list, see if you think we can leave any out. Are some just ideals?

COMMITMENT SUNDAY:

At synod the idea was raised about having a special commitment Sunday around the Diocese. This would be on the last Sunday of Advent (or at least some time during Advent) when people would be invited to come forward and to make a public commitment to a way of life over the coming year that was focused on the Gospel demands of Jesus. Of course we do that each year at Easter. This advent commitment, however, is meant to assist us as we seek to be faithful to our calls to discipleship over the coming year of renewal and mission.

Along with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we will have the opportunity, at a public celebration, of coming forward and making our baptismal promises in a focused way, along with others and all the time asking that the rest of the congregation pray for us and with us. It is all about renewing God's Church by along God to renew each and every one of us.

These studies on discipleship are a part of the preparation for that commitment. We are setting ourselves some clearly spelled out goals and visions and then hopefully going about working out how we will fulfill meet those goals and put in place the steps we need to make them a reality. And we will do this as a Church community.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

A shoot springs forth from the stump of Jesse....Isaiah 11:1-10

Isaiah now moves on from the prophecies relating to the destruction of Assyria to a message of hope. This hope is built on the promised king in the line of David. This king will restore the nation to the heights it had when David ruled in Jerusalem. This kingdom will be marked by faithfulness to God's rule and brings with it a promise of salvation and restoration. It seems to be a fulfillment of the prophecy given to Hezekiah in 9:2-7. It is possible that we have two prophecies here that were once independent passages. The first 9:1-5 which speaks about the future king and the other 6-9 which refers more to a future idyllic future time which is on offer for all peoples.

11:1 From the stump of Jesse...Jesse was the father of David and here we see that the nation had been so savaged that it had been reduced to a mere stump. The grandeur and might of the tree that had once been the nation had been taken away by violent enemies. More than likely this refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 by the Babylonians. The **branch that grows out of its roots** points us to the hope that with the coming of this Davidic ancestor there will be a return to the power and the peace of the time of David.

11:2 The Spirit of the Lord.... This king would be a charismatic leader, filled with the power of God's creative Spirit. The people of Isaiah's time believed that the kings were endowed with special gifts that enabled them to rule with justice and wisdom. His ruling abilities come not from within himself but from the energizing power of God.

He is endowed with the gifts he needs for ruling — wisdom, insight, counsel, knowledge and fear of the Lord. This is no military king. *Fear of the Lord* indicates that he will be humble before God, knowing his place in the order of creation. This is opposed to the picture of 29:13, where the religion is only lip service. Here, the king rules understanding that God Rules through him and in him in order to bring about his divine purposes.

11:3 The fear of Yahweh is his breath... This is a good translation for it indicates that obedience to God is the very breath of this king (this is better than the reading: *and his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord*). This is considered to be a variant text, added much later and in some bibles it is either left out or sometimes written in brackets. However, it is an excellent commentary on the king. **He shall not judge by what his eyes see** shows us a king who is able to discern the inner qualities and inner thoughts of people, marking him off as someone special. Being able to detect a falsehood was seen as an important gift for a king to have.

11:4 and judge with equity for the meek of the earth... these meek ones are the peoples who have been oppressed and crushed by the evil forces around them. He will therefore set out to right the wrongs that are all around him and will listen to and judge the grievances of God's people whenever they are in pain. He is therefore to be a man of justice, caring not whether a person is rich or poor.

The word of his mouth is a rod with which he will strike the violent...There is a special warning here for those who use violence as a weapon. This righteous king will strike them down, for the sake of the restoration of justice. He will not hesitate to bring his power into play for the good of the meek and those who suffer from injustices.

11:5 Integrity is the loincloth around his waist, faithfulness the belt about his hips.... These qualities—faithfulness and integrity— are divine qualities. God himself is filled with integrity and can be relied upon for his faithfulness. The king will wear these qualities as he does his Royal clothing.

11:6-9 The wolf will live with the lamb...We now move into the next section which describes a kind of paradise that comes about through the establishment of a just and God focused society. The rule of the true and godly king will bring about transformations at all levels of creation. The imagery here and in the next two verses spell out in images, the level of salvation that is to come. The wild animals mix freely with the domesticated animals and small children can grow up without risking harm from the beasts of the forest. The weakest and vulnerable (**the weaned child**) in the community will have nothing to fear in their lives.

The closing verse sums up these images beautifully: **they do no hurt, no harm on all my holy mountain, for the country is filled with the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters swell the sea.** It is the *knowledge of Yahweh* that is the key. It is knowing God, and not just in the sense of a head knowledge but more in terms of living out a God-fearing life that makes a difference to creation. When people live God fearing lives, the earth itself is filled with the power and love of God in the same way that water fills the sea.

Both of these passages are magnificent in their poetry. Written to a people who are crushed under the weight of personal and national tragedy and suffering from persecution and a hopeless past, Isaiah reminds them of the faithfulness and righteousness of God. The answer to their pain is not to be found in human power and human politics. It is to be found in a gift of God. If the world is to be transformed and restored to paradise living, it must allow God to be the agent of change. They have experienced the consequences of the human pursuit for power and possessions; they were exiled in Babylon and the nation destroyed.

The message is clear: God is the answer to our quest to discover the true meaning of our lives. In this king in the line of David (Jesus) salvation is possible. The world can be transformed. We can live in a world that is characterized by peace, justice, integrity and plenty if we are prepared to live under God.

What makes up a godly life? *If we were to be like Isaiah and list the sins of the Church, what would appear on the list? What are the main sins of discipleship from which we need to repent? What would paradise look like for you? How would you go about creating it? What stops this from being a reality today?*

Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.... Matthew 3:1-3

John the Baptist:

John the Baptist plays a key role in the Gospel story, as is indicated by the fact that he is mentioned in all of them. The Jewish historian **Josephus** wrote of the life and ministry of John the Baptist in this way: *He was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice toward their fellows and piety toward God, and so doing to join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the should was already thoroughly cleansed by right behaviour.* This is a good insight from someone who would have not enthusiastically embraced the Christian movement. He notes the following

- John was a good man whose ministry was focused on urging the Jews to live lives of righteousness (ie. obedience to God and his covenant commandments).
- He encouraged them to live lives of justice and not just speak about it or acknowledge it as something required by God. Their religion was 'other' directed.
- The faithful were to live lives of piety that were God-directed and God-focused. His emphasis was on the practice of piety and not just sitting back being comfortable because they were children of Abraham (Matt 3:9-11).
- Baptism was something they underwent as a way of symbolizing a life of repentance and not as some kind of magical way of removing sins. God was merciful when the person lived in godly ways and not just spoke of being godly.
- He noted also that John spoke of baptism as being the consecration of and the ritual presentation of something that had already taken place—a life cleansed by right behaviour.

John in the Gospels:

In the Gospels, the ministry of John the Baptist was directed towards the proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God. It was in this context that he urged the people to repent and to make preparations for its advent. Like Elijah before him (his clothing leads us to make this link - 2 Kings 1:8) he saw himself as a prophet, not so much predicting the future but proclaiming a judgment on the present.

His message had two elements that are important for us today: confession and repentance (Matt 3:6). By means of both of these people could avoid the coming wrath (3:7). In his ministry John presumed that the faithful sons and daughters of Abraham were sinners, that they failed to live up to the covenant demands and so were in need of healing. They had a ritual celebration for the forgiveness of sins in the Day of Atonement celebrations. On that day, the people, led by the Priest, would put their sins onto a goat and lead it out into the desert where it would perish - and hopefully their sins perished with it. They knew that sins alienated them from God and had a negative impact on the life of the community but struggled with the whole idea of "being forgiven". This is why the message of John and later the message and ministry of Jesus offered so much hope for the people. They could be forgiven. They did not have to pretend that their failures did not exist or that they were perfect. God loved them anyway.

Repent!

This was John's first exhortation and this is a most significant biblical action. At its basic level it means turning or returning to the life of obedience for which we were created and to which we are called by the covenant God has made with us. It represents a fundamental reorientation of the whole of a person's life, in its day to day activities as well as in the heart and mind of the repentant person. One cannot repent if one's way of living does not change. The Hebrew word means "to turn around" and face the Lord. What a person brings to God is not a life of righteousness but a *broken and contrite heart*. We cannot impress God and win his favour by our worship and our good deeds (Amos 5:21-25; Hos 5:6; 6:6). We need to be living so that God can create a *clean heart* (Psalm 51:10).

Repentance is built on our need for God:

It is important to understand that it is God who gives the grace of repentance. We are called to prepare the way for the Lord (Romans 2:4). We do this by realizing that we actually need a saviour. We are in the need of salvation. We have to come to God seeking the gift of healing and forgiveness.

Repentance not conversion:

This means that repentance is something that needs to be done, not only at the beginning of the spiritual life of the disciple but throughout the whole of our lives. In each and every human moment and every human encounter, we are called upon to open ourselves up to the movement of God with us. This is why repentance is a far more significant word than conversion. Indeed, the idea of having a particular moment in one's life (the time of my conversion) in which a person gives his or her life to God finds little support in the New Testament, particularly if this moment is more important than other moments. The word *convert* is rare in the New Testament (possibly found only in Acts 15:3). We are not called to convert or to a life of conversion. Rather we are called to repent and to keep on repenting throughout our lives.

They confessed their sins...

Here we come to a notion that is so foreign to our world (and Church of today) - confession. When I was a lad growing up, we were taken off to confession every Saturday night and thought nothing of it. We were taught to reflect on our actions over the previous week, to acknowledge our sins and failings and to go onto our knees before God and make our confession. There was something about the healing grace of the sacrament of confession that was so reassuring, so comforting and so energizing. But today, this is one of the sacraments that seems to have passed out of our Church life and that is a shame.

SIN!

There, I have said it. One of the problems that we have with this whole notion of repentance is that it requires that we first of all acknowledge that we have sinned. And, if we truly acknowledge that, we will wish to turn to God and seek his forgiveness. But who speaks of sin today? In fact, what is a sin in today's world? Can we really describe sins? Can we accept that we are sinners and that we do sin? Perhaps before we can answer that, we need to reacquaint ourselves with sin. What is it?

At its simplest level, sin is a failure of love—we fail to love ourselves, others and God as we ought, as we are called to love. It is a breach of the covenant that was established in and through the blood of Jesus on the cross and the expectations of that covenant are spelled out in the Scriptures. Sin is when we fail, by an action or an inaction, to love as we ought to love and as we are called to love.

This is very important, for if we do not know what a sin is, how are we going to want Jesus in our lives? If we do not feel as though we are sinners in need of forgiveness, how on earth are we ever going to rejoice in the gift of being saved (which means salvation from sin)? Without a clear understanding of Jesus

dying on the cross for our sins, he becomes little more than an inspiring prophet, a good person who brought us a whole bucket load of wonderful sayings. But he was never just a good person. He was and is our saviour. To celebrate that, we first of all have to admit that we are sinners. That we have sinned. That we have sins in need of forgiveness.

It may be true that in the past the Church was far too preoccupied with sins and the morbid side of sinful living and Church leaders are still parodied for condemning many of the things that people were doing as a normal part of modern living. This is nowhere more true than in areas of human sexuality. But instead of dropping the idea of sin, we are better off going back to the Bible and rediscovering the balance between sin and goodness.

Jesus and the sinner:

Jesus came to forgive sins. He came bringing healing and new life. After the resurrection, it was his wish that the Church continue the mission and ministry given to him by the Father, which is why in John 20:23 he blessed the Church in this way: *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins they are retained.* That is the simple yet powerful foundation for what came to be the sacrament of confession. God wants to forgive the sinner and sends upon us his life giving Spirit so that we are led to repent. Of course sins can be forgiven without going to the sacrament of confession but there are graces to be had there that are life strengthening and spiritually empowering.

This is a gift that has been given to the Church and not just to the ordained ministers. When a sinner comes to confess his or her sins, it is the Church gathered in response to the wishes of Jesus Christ, which forgives in his name. Here is no magical hocus pocus here. What is at work is the grace of God in Christ through the ministry of the Church. We see this in the wording of the absolution in the rite of confession provided in the Australian Prayer Book (AAPB):

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive you your offences: and by his authority committed to me I absolve you from all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is easy to forget this point but it is important for our life as disciples. Jesus reminded the people that he came for the sick, not for those who are well. But that means all people who genuinely seek God, for we are all sinners. We should be comforted by the words of 1 John 1:9 ... *If we acknowledge our sins, he who is just can be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrong.*

What is a sin?

At the heart of sin is the freely made decision to do something that breaches the command to love God and to love our neighbour. Sin becomes alive within the Body of Christ as the warmth between members cools. We simply stop looking too hard for the truth and begin to slip into a life that is a lie. We have a disorder (a failure in faithfulness) that we will not face. Our freedom becomes the most important thing in our lives (which manifests itself as individualism) and the pursuit of pleasure and satisfaction gives our lives its purpose and meaning (generally seen in our accumulation of possessions). People and things become like gods to be used independent of God's overriding plan and purpose for creation. Instead of God being at the centre of our universe, he is moved to the periphery.

The thing about sin is that it grows. It becomes a part of our way of life for nothing human is instantaneous. What happens at 12.00 today began to take shape at 11.30 which moved on from 9.30. Our sin today grows out of attitudes that were built up yesterday, last week and over the last year or more. If we were to be honest, we would acknowledge that we were aware of what was happening but instead we chose to ignore it, rationalize it or pretend that there was nothing wrong with what we were doing.

Often too we chose sin by default: I do not do what is right and reasonable. Sin is not always about losing my temper with God. Mostly I just ignore him and decide not to do the good thing that I know Jesus is calling me to do. Sinfulness therefore leads to a sinful action (just as a person ends up drunk by allowing his glass to be filled over and over again). It is not serious for a while and we do not notice the move from life to death. Nothing happens when we cross that line and soon we cross it willingly as if it were not there. It is to this kind of community that John in the Book of Revelation delivers the judgment of Christ: *you have turned aside from your early love (Rev 2:4)*.

Examining Our Consciences:

Our challenge is to draw up a list of possible sins. We already have the ten commandments, which are a good start but we need to go deeper into what that list might mean for our daily living. Here is one list that comes from an English manual and it attempts to assist us in sitting down and prayerfully examining our lives according to the demands of the Gospel:

You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with all your soul and with all your mind and all your strength (Mk 12:30).

- Do I love God?
- Do I make an idol of money, things, actions?
- Do I blaspheme?
- Do I study, listen to the Word of God and try to obey all of God's commandments?
- Do I go to Mass regularly on Sundays?
- Do I keep Sunday holy?
- Do I say my prayers daily?

You must love your neighbour as you love yourself (Mark 12:31)

- Have I hated others?
- Do I love my family and friends?
- Have I been faithful to my spouse?
- Have I honoured my mother and father?
- Do I contribute my share to the Church?
- Do I contribute generously to good causes?

- Have I lived up to the commission I received at my confirmation?
- Am I a peacemaker?
- Do I give an example of Christian living?
- Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness and speak up for my beliefs and principles?

- Have I respected the integrity of creation?
- Do I visit the bereaved, the lonely, the sick and the imprisoned?

- Have I stolen from others?
- Have I cheated my spouse, my employer, my employee or others?
- Have I made restitution for something I stole?
- Have I harmed someone's good name?
- Have I engaged in gossip?
- Have I been quarrelsome?
- Have I thought ill of others and used others for my own end?
- Have I exploited others sexually, either directly or through other means (eg internet)?

Be perfect as your Father is perfect (Matt 5:48)

- Do I fast and practice self-control?
- Have I followed my conscience on all things?
- Have I tried to acquire the habits of wisdom and understanding?
- Have I wallowed in self-pity?
- Have I allowed myself to be consumed by ambition, bitterness or disappointment?
- Have I wasted money?
- Have I kept my word?
- Have I been proud?
- Have I coveted other people's possessions or spouse?
- Have I indulged in impurity?
- Have I been envious of others?
- Have I been greedy?
- Have I been angry?
- Have I been lazy?

For Action: Come up with a workable table for an examination of conscience.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Courage! Do not be afraid! Your God is coming Isaiah 35:1-10

In the section just prior to this one, we seen the terrible evils that will come upon Edom. Now we see the blessings that are to be bestowed upon a repentant and restored Judah. It is to be a time of great prosperity and peace, with the people living contentedly in the land free from suffering. It is a promise to all of the scattered Jews and not just who lived in exile in Babylon.

- 35:1** **The wilderness and the dry lands will rejoice...**the transformation under God will impact on all creation. The image is taken from the experience of the people when they observe the changes that take place in the desert after a rainstorm. Where there was once nothing, the flowers suddenly bloom. When God returns, he will come like the transforming rain storm.
- 35:2** The changes under God will be extensive. As the desert wildernesses will be covered with the luxuriant growths of the Lebanon forests, so the lives of the faithful will be enriched. The rich and fertile tops of the mountains of Carmel and Sharon will be reproduced in the deserts of Israel. As people would notice such changes, so they will be able to experience the power of God that will be at work among them.
- 35:3** **Strengthen all weary hands, steady all trembling knees....**It is tough going for those who wish to remain faithful to God. Here we see the prophet encouraging them to be strong and to endure in faithfulness. The joy of the coming age should act as an incentive for them not to give in or give up in the face of difficult times. Their sorrow and pain will soon pass.
- 35:4** **Behold your God is coming.....**this is an important guarantee for those who are still living under foreign oppression. And, when God comes, he will be coming with vengeance. This is no milksop God. Rather, he is one who will come and right the wrongs that have been inflicted upon his people.
- 35:5-7** **Then the eyes of the blind...then the lame man....** The prophets used the idea of blindness and deafness to describe the spiritual state of the people. Here though, Isaiah has in mind the removal of all physical illnesses in the new age. There will be a healing and life giving energy flowing through the land, something highlighted with the image of **water gushing in the desert, streams in the wasteland, the scorched earth becomes a lake and the parched land springs of water.** It may well be that the prophet's experience of poor harvests due to drought and war may be behind this kind of magnificent vision of transformation. In the paradise that is this new kingdom under God, there will be no such things as "dryness" or "being parched" or sickness, suffering and pain. With God all remains blessed, fruitful and peace filled.
- 35:8** Where there was little more than a rough track that was barely passable, there will now be a major highway. But this highway is for those who remain undefiled by unfaithfulness. Presumably the sinner will still have to struggle with the goat track. The "fools" who travel the track are those who are ignorant of the Law (torah) and not knowing God and his ways, are forced to battle the desert using their own devices and skills.
- 35:10** **The ransomed of the Lord shall return...**This is indeed the great hope—that God will ransom and redeem his people. They will not find their own way home. God will call them home and God will lead them home. This would have ended the original Book of Isaiah, with the remainder being added at a later date (36-39 almost word for word from 2 Kgs 18:17-20:19).

It should be no surprise that the Book of Isaiah should end on this very positive note. For a people beset with so many problems and difficulties and who have been through the horrors of war, famine, disease, exile and who have lived through the destruction of their land, this must have been a true tonic. Yes, in the darkest moments of human suffering, there is always the kernel of hope, a hope that springs from a life lived under God's covenant. This is why the prophet is so strong in exhorting them to faithfulness. Without a life of faithfulness, it is difficult to find God in times of crisis.

For us today: *Take the images offered to us by Isaiah and write up the transformation of our lives and our Church that can come about through the actions of God? Where is the wilderness for us (our Church), the dry lands, the lions and the jackals? What can be done to transform them? How? If we do not think we live in a wilderness, we have no need of transformation and so no need of God.*

What are some of the things that we can be doing and need to be doing to allow God to bring about his transformation in our lives and in our world?

Look, I am sending my messenger before you to prepare your way before you....Matthew 11:2-11

Once again we have John the Baptist featuring in our Advent stories and in the Gospel accounts of the mission and ministry of Jesus. Why is that? In the section 11:1-19 there are three stories about John:

- 11:2-6 John's question to Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come?"
- 11:7-11 Jesus' assessment of John the Baptist.
- 11:16-19 a parable about the negative responses to both John and Jesus.

Here Matthew follows the same order of presentation that we find in Luke's account of the same stories and so we can presume that they both shared the same source materials. But, given their content and the style in which they were written, it is also reasonable to assume that they were originally three un-connected stories that were joined together on the basis that they all dealt with similar material.

Regarding the first question (11:2-6) there is some ambiguity in what is being said. Is Jesus in fact affirming that he is the "one who is to come" and his works confirm that? Or, is he saying that even though his works differ from what people expect of the coming Messiah, he is still "the one who is to come"? In affirming that he is the messiah he would be looking to a text like Isaiah 35:5-6... *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart and a tongue of the dumb sing for joy.* That text is located in the time after the exile when the people are encouraged to look forward to the day when God will act to establish a new reign of justice, peace and joy for his people. In that day, all suffering will be removed and the sick restored to health. But there is no mention of a messiah figure who will inaugurate that period of divine activity. It does, however, naturally lead onto an idea of a messianic era with the coming of a messiah. What Jesus is therefore saying in our passage under study is that if he is "doing" the work of the messiah, he is indeed the messiah, the "one who is to come".

But Jesus is also reinterpreting one of the traditional expectations regarding the coming messiah and in Judaism there were a number of these. One example of these visions comes to us from the Psalms of Solomon 17-18. These were written in the first century BC in Jerusalem and show a messiah who is a military successor to David. He will purge and renew Israel, turning it into a kingdom of this world, taking the people back to the political glories of the time when David sat on the throne on Mount Zion. Such a messiah would remove all of the pagan rulers, re-establish the boundaries of the twelve tribes and set himself up as the ideal King, with all of the material and political power and influence that went with such a post. He would rule with justice and avoid making the mistakes of the kings who held office after David and would rely on God to establish his reign.

This is the kind of expectation against which Jesus may well be speaking. He is saying: *I do the works of the Messiah but they are not the works you expect God's Messiah to be doing. I am a different kind of messiah, but the Messiah nevertheless.* Whatever Matthew might be wanting to say, what Matthew wishes to affirm is that Jesus is the Messiah, that he is the *one who is to come*.

With the second section (11:7-15) the key moment is reached with the statement that *he (John) is Elijah*. Matthew asserts that John is no *reed shaking in the wind*. The reed is a light grass that is easily moved around when the wind blows and it appears on coins minted under Herod Antipas. Nor is he *clothed in soft garments* as Herod himself might be. On the contrary, he is clothed in rough clothing, lives in the desert (and so is tough and unbending) and is a prophet (not a soft king). Using images that would bring to mind texts like Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20, Matthew shows a John the Baptist as a messenger from God who has been raised up to prepare the way for Jesus.

The Rejection of John and Jesus: 11:16:17

Both Jesus and John were rejected by the Jews of their day, even though John was no more than a prophet announcing the day of the Lord and Jesus was the promised Messiah. This little parable (16-17) shows two kinds of parties, a feast and a funeral. Matthew associates Jesus with the happy games and John with the sad ones. There was no positive response from the spiritual leaders of Israel to either Jesus or John. They both lived very different lives but were both rejected. They were rejected, not because of who they were and what they did. They were rejected because the people of their time were impossible to keep happy. Whatever such men did would have difficulty in being accepted, because their opponents were blind and mean spirited.

That was the experience of Matthew's own community. They too were being judged with harshness by the Jewish leadership and rejected from the synagogues. They too knew the condemnation endured by John and Jesus. Though his community was working hard at proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom, they were not being heard. And so the evangelist is reassuring them that *thus it was in the time of the master as well. If they rejected the messiah himself, how much more likely will it be that they reject those who come in his name.* As Jesus did not abandon his Father's business on the basis of the hardship involved in it, so too they must persevere in faithfulness.

For our reflection:

The rejection of Jesus and John was not a consequence of their own failures and wrong doing. It was an unresponsive and unrepentant world that rejected them. John and Jesus represent very different ends of the perspective of the Kingdom (wedding party and funeral dirges) yet neither could find a place in the thinking and religious aspirations of their time. What about the Church of today? Why is it so that much of the Western world rejects outright the Gospel message and the Church community which is called to live and proclaim it?

Is the problem ours or the worlds? Or is it both? Can you come up with some kind of list of the problems on both sides? What can we do to address this major difficulty?

In what way is Jesus Christ our messiah? If we were to draw up a job description for a messiah, what are the kinds of qualities for which we would be looking? What are the kinds of tasks that we would be expecting of him? What are some of the warnings that we might like to give him as he takes up his ministry?

How would we take on the role of John the Baptist? How might we go about preparing the way for the people of our own communities to accept Jesus as their Messiah? As disciples of Jesus Christ, what is our role in the coming of the Kingdom of God into today's world?

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The virgin will conceive and bear a Son.. Immanuel.. Isa 7:10-14

Some Background:

In the background of this text is the plan of king Ahaz to go to Assyria and submit himself to her authority and power and invite her in to protect the southern kingdom. Instead of trusting in God to protect them and lead them, the king was prepared to go to a foreign power with foreign gods and place the future of the nation under her care. What the prophet is trying to do here is convince the king that this is a foolish act and that it is not too late to change his mind. At the time there was an attempt to put together an anti-Assyria coalition, a move that would have risked bringing down on Israel the wrath of the Mesopotamian armies a coalition in which Judah was unwilling to become involved. What is at risk here is Jerusalem, the city of God. The armies of the Arameans and Israelites were threatening to march against Jerusalem and Isaiah is keen that Ahaz remain neutral and not become involved by inviting the Assyrians to become involved in the local conflict.

Who is the virgin of 7:14?

This is a difficult passage to interpret, particularly in the light of later Christian readings. But there have been three major suggestions:

- No particular woman is in mind.
- She is the wife of the king and so the son would be heir to the throne.
- She is the wife of the prophet and so the child will be the son of the prophet.

Given that the prophet is giving the name to the child and that it is the name of the child rather than the actual birth of the child that bears the prophetic message, it is reasonably certain that the maiden is the wife of the prophet.

The Christian tradition has led many to see this verse as pointing us towards Mary's virginal birth. That, however, would be stretching the text beyond what it was intended to say. The Hebrew verb is in the past, meaning that she has already conceived a child. It can only be applied to the Blessed Virgin in terms of its message: God never abandons his faithful people. He will always act in mercy and compassion to save those he loves. God is always *Immanuel*, a reality he shows in a unique way in the birth of his only Son Jesus.

- 7:10 Again the Lord spoke...** What is important about this opening statement is the confidence with which the prophet ascribes the will of God to his words. It is not Isaiah who is speaking but the Lord God speaking to Ahaz through the prophetic words of Isaiah.
- 7:11 Ask a sign of the Lord...** This is not necessarily something miraculous. It could be a normal, everyday event that is given a special meaning and significance. In this case it is not so much the birth of the child but the name that is given to the child.
- 7:12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask..."** Here Ahaz is speaking from past experience. When the prophet spoke in the past, he did not like the message and so he is not going to be caught out again. The real problem is not so much what the prophet might say but what will inevitably be required of Ahaz in response to the what is said. Once he has heard the message he will not be able comfortably to ignore it.
- 7:13 And he said, "Hear then, O house of David".** There is here, a clear link with the past, with the Davidic dynasty of old. Ahaz should therefore understand that he ruled with a whole host of divine promises and so he should not be afraid. Why is he worried about Ephraim when, as the king in the line of David, he should be ruling over Ephraim? Thus the frustrated note that creeps into the voice of the prophet: **Is it too little for you to weary men...** It is by refusing to live by the promises of God that the king is incurring the anger of God. He is turning from God to trust in men and that is the path to destruction (see 8:14-15 where Yahweh is said to be the rock on which the nation will stumble). Ahaz has procrastinated for so long and put off making his decision that everyone is starting to become a little frustrated. It has gone on for so long that even God himself is becoming weary.
- 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign....** Because Ahaz has refused to ask for a sign, God is taking the initiative and will give a sign. The sign is in the name of the child. He is to be called **Immanuel**— God with us. She has already conceived and in the future will bear a son and he will carry the sacred promise of God's abiding presence. By calling him Immanuel, God is once again reassuring the King (and the people) that he is not going to abandon them. He therefore has no reason to fear the forces that are threatening the nation.

What does this text offer for us today?

- God speaks to his people in every generation. The problem all too often is this: what happens when we do not like what God says/demands? Ahaz knew that if he heard God speaking he would have to choose to obey the divine voice (and so risk going against popular opinion and maybe even face death) or listen to what God wanted and change the way he was living. How often do we find ourselves in some kind of inner conflict over the word of God (addressed to us in the Scriptures and in Tradition) and the word of the world? Can you think of some examples? How do we respond?
- How do we understand the theological concept *Immanuel* in our personal lives, in the world in which we live and in our Church? How is God experienced as being real? If God is with us, he must be with us with all of his power, might, creative energy, saving and merciful love and so on. Is this our experience? How can we convince the world that God is *Immanuel*? What are the signs that would convince them that God is indeed *Immanuel*? Why do they not believe it now? What hinders them?
- God spoke through the prophet in such a way that the words of the prophet were the words of God. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to give witness to the world so that people can experience the Kingdom through the life of the believer. Does the world experience God's saving mercy through his chosen servants—the Church? What experience of God does our parish give to the world?

She will give birth to a Son and you must name him Jesus...Matt 1:18-25

This story is an important continuation from the genealogy at the opening of the Gospel. There we saw Jesus firmly located within the lineage of David. This present birth story takes us further by showing that this same Jesus was the Son of God who was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. He is Jesus the Messiah (this is what the Christ in his name means—the anointed one, the Messiah). This story makes it clear from the beginning of the Gospel that we are not dealing with just another human birth. What we are being caught up into is the divine work of salvation. God is acting in time to fulfill his covenant promise and is sending us his messiah. We now begin to experience the breaking in of Divine power, the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Hebrew Marriage Customs

Most marriages were arranged through the elders of the family and the process usually began when the boys were thirteen and the girls twelve. The betrothal took place in the home of the father of the bride. At the betrothal, the husband would present to the bride (and her father) the contract of marriage and the bride-price. There may then follow several years before the marriage itself took place. At that ceremony, the bride would be taken from her father's home to the home of the groom or the groom's father. We can presume from Matthew that the betrothal ceremony had already taken place between Joseph and Mary and they were awaiting the wedding. Mary would have remained at her father's house and Joseph would have visited from time to time.

Mary's situation seems to be a breach of the law as it is set out in Deuteronomy 22:23:

If a virgin is betrothed and a man meets her in the city and sleeps with her you shall take them both out to the gate of the town and stone them to death;

This is Joseph's dilemma. Does he carry out the demands of the law or is there an alternative way forward? He chooses to divorce Mary quietly. This meant that he produced a written notice signed by two witnesses that he had divorced her and she was now free to marry someone else. This meant that she would not be subjected to the same that would have come had he followed the laws of Deuteronomy.

As he searches for what to do **an angel of the Lord** appears to him. In many of the biblical accounts of angels of the Lord appearing at decisive moments in the history of God's people, it is often difficult to distinguish between the angel and God himself. And so it is the case here. God speaks to him in a dream and reassures him that what is happening is coming about because of divine activity.

You shall name him Jesus:

The naming of Jesus follows a long tradition of naming that is found in the Old Testament:

There is the announcement of the birth that is introduced by "*behold*". Then there is the child's name and the spelling out of his role.

This pattern is to be found with Ishmael ((Gen 16:11), Isaac (Gen 17:19), Solomon (1 Chron 22:9), Josiah (1 Kgs 13:2), and the child of Isaiah 7:14, though none of these was a virginal birth. This pattern of fulfillment would have been apparent to the people of Matthew's community and have helped to place this birth into the context of divine activity. There are to be many other examples in Matthew's Gospel of God's will being fulfilled: 1:23; 2:5,15,17,23; 3:3; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14,35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9. This is all a part of the intent of the Evangelist as he seeks to make it clear to his community that God is continuing to act, that what is unfolding around them is a part of God's ongoing care as he brings his plans to fulfillment. The fullness of God's promises are to be found in this Jesus Christ.

Joseph:

Matthew has used Joseph to establish the Davidic ancestry of Jesus. In our section (18-25) he is trying to ensure that his readers that Jesus is not only a Son of David but also the Son of God. He is not going to leave that to the story of the resurrection. He is establishing the divinity of Jesus here at his divine conception and in doing that, Joseph has a key role. He is presented as being a faithful Jew and a man of great integrity as we follow him through his initial confusion at the news of Mary's pregnancy, the trust that he displays in both her and in God and his ultimate enlightenment by the angel. In this way he is a good model for discipleship. How difficult it is to move from confusion - how can this be so? - by putting faith in God and relying on him to bring all things to his determined end.

The Virgin Birth of Jesus:

The New Testament writers were keen to establish that Jesus was a real person and not some kind of angel or spirit. He was truly human and truly divine. What is important to keep in mind is that the writers were in no way interested in providing biographical details or in trying to explain the "how" of these things. Their intent is to spell out the vital spiritual nature of the birth.

For them, Christ was born *not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of an husband, but of God (Jn 1:13)*. It is the Spirit, the power of the Most High (Lk 1:35) who is the life-giving agent in the birth of the new man, Jesus Christ (1 Cor 14:45). And it is a new age. Matthew uses the word *genesis* (1:1, 18) when speaking of the birth of Jesus. What he is doing is writing about is a new Genesis about the New Adam and the New Creation. This is the point towards which God has been moving history and now THE time had come.

The Virgin Birth, then, is a key part of the doctrine of the New Testament. Its focus is on God. He has now stepped directly into history to make preparations for the final stage of world history, where the world will be judged and his chosen faithful ones crowned in glory. It is a unique event, ushered in by a unique act of God - the birth of his only Son. In this context, the idea of the New Man being born of the virginal New Eve (Mary), is not hard to understand. The idea of a virgin birth is not something that is meant to preserve the Mother of God from sexual activity, or to raise her up beyond what she has always been - a faithful disciple. It is not about Mary. It is all about God.

An attack on Mary

It has been claimed that Matthew put the concept of a virginal birth into his Gospel in response to claims that Jesus was an illegitimate child. It had been claimed that his father was a Roman soldier by the name of Panthera. It is hard to work out whether or not these claims were there early or later in the life of the Church but they did persist, especially in a book of Jewish polemics called *Toledot Yeshu*.

For Sharing:

- The way God chooses to be God is as *Immanuel*. Where is he to be found today? How do we recognize him? In what way is he "with us"? How do we experience his presence? When we say he is the God who is, who was and who is to come, what does that mean? Is he now as he was at creation? During the great expansion of Israel in Canaan?
- If God offers creation so much, why is it that the world finds it so difficult to believe and to live his Kingdom ways? What is wrong with the way the world sees God? How can the Truth be more profitably and powerfully proclaimed?
- What does believing mean for the way you live out your faith life?