

Immanuel, or: Do Not Be Afraid to Live Your Life!

Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Advent
on December 20th /21st 2025 at St Sebastian's Cathedral
Isaiah 7:10–14; Matthew 1:18–25

From the holy Gospel according to Matthew

¹⁸ Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. ²¹ She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. ²⁵ He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus.

What a story! A young woman and an unwanted pregnancy; a man who feels betrayed and wants to separate; a dream, an angel, and a great turning point; a man who adopts a child that is not his own. On television or in the cinema, you could certainly make something of this story. A bit of scandal, several twists, and – somehow, real life. For what we hear here – perhaps except for the angel – is something we have heard somewhere, sometime, before.

Dear brothers and sisters, this is not cinema, but the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. And it is the other version, the one we do not

hear at Christmas – not the stable, not the angelic choir, but an apparent adultery and the struggle to do what is right.

Here, Jesus is born into a truly precarious situation. Mary is pregnant, not by the man she is promised to and not yet living with. If it became known that this pregnancy was not by Joseph, according to the laws of the Torah, Mary would face death by stoning. If Joseph made it public – “This child is not mine” – he would expose Mary to a cruel fate. But Joseph does not seem to want this; quietly, without public disgrace, he wants to separate from her.

Joseph clearly did not make it easy for himself, for he considered it. He probably tried to work out what was right. To separate quietly, or to stand by this woman and her child. This is a question of many couples, many women facing unwanted and unplanned pregnancies, must ask themselves: Can I do it, can we manage it? It is a frightening situation!

And here the voice of the Divine – in the form of an angel of the Lord – comes to Joseph: and this voice gives him courage.

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the child she is expecting is from the Holy Spirit. (Mt 1:20)

Do not be afraid! Stand by mother and child! In God’s name, the angel strengthens both the man and the woman. And the name of this child says it all: Jesus, which means “the Lord is salvation”, and Immanuel: “God with us!” (Mt 1:23cd). Joseph takes heart – he accepts them both and makes this child, who is not from him, his own – for he gives him a name, as fathers did in those days.

The Gospel of Matthew tells this story to highlight the special nature of this child: He is the Saviour, the Redeemer, for whom people have

been waiting. That is why the Gospel refers to this passage from the prophet Isaiah (Isa 7:14) about the child “Immanuel” – the child “God with us” – which, according to the prophecy, is a sign of God’s closeness, the newborn child of a woman who has never been a mother is a sign of a new beginning in times of deportation and war. For the prophet speaks into such distress. And Matthew recalls this promise to say: this Jesus is a sign of salvation from distress! This Jesus is a sign of a new beginning. In Jesus, the prophecy from those days is fulfilled. This sign from the prophet becomes the Gospel also for us, for you and me: God is present in times of need, fear, and uncertainty. He is there for you! We must remember this sign: especially now, a year after the attack at the Christmas market.

We can also hear this scripture with the message: Jesus is born into difficult circumstances. Where things don’t run smoothly, where life does not meet the general norm or what people expect of one another. No, Jesus – the Son of God, this child of the Spirit – is born into ordinary life. For that is exactly where God wants to be – not so much where everything is straight and proper, but rather where life is challenged. Just as it probably is for you and me.

It is up to us to learn to trust, to know that we do not need to be afraid. “Do not be afraid to take this woman to yourself.” Do not be afraid of the situation that perhaps frightens you, from which you might wish to escape, which you might want to avoid, which challenges you so much. Do not be afraid to face it! Do not be afraid, for God is with you!

Presumably, we too, you and I, in the challenges of our lives, time and again need a messenger of the Lord to say to us: Do not be afraid of what seems to overwhelm you: God is with you! And this messenger does not have to be an angel in heavenly robes – this

angel can be the person sitting next to you in the pew, the one walking beside you through life. And you too can support your fellow human beings by giving them courage: You will manage – God is with you; Do not be afraid!

What a story! Really, a story in which we can find ourselves with our own lives. The birth of Jesus seems to be just as complicated as our lives – yours and mine. That is incredibly reassuring. So: Do not be afraid to live your life!

By Deacon Thomas

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Sermons in English

Sermons as German podcast

