

IV SUNDAY IN ADVENT– 18th December 2016

JESUS WILL BE BORN OF MARY, BRIDE OF JOSEPH, FROM THE HOUSE OF DAVID Biblical commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 1,18-24

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her 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." All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us)

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife.....

Mathew's gospel opens with the genealogy of Jesus. We read in the gospel: "*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac,::*" etc., etc., there are a series of generations. To understand this, we must put ourselves into the Jewish culture, into the Jewish language of that time, where the word parents did not exist. There was a father, the one who generates, and the mother, she who simply give birth. At the birth of a child the father and the mother did not contribute in the same way: the mother was considered a kind of incubator, that only received the seed of the husband, and then, in time, expelled it, and so it is a man the generates a male. Well, we have all the genealogy of Jesus, generation after generation, of men that generate other men, until we arrive at verse 16: "*Jacob*". is the grandfather of Jesus, "*Jacob the father of Joseph.....*" and here we would expect, for the fortieth time, the verb to create, and Joseph begot Jesus. Instead here it is cut out, the genealogy is broken: "*Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.*" There is something new, there is a incredible novelty. Mary is credited in the same way as was attributed to the men. What does the evangelist want to say? That with Mary, that tradition born at the beginning of time, and that had been carried with the history of Israel, is closed with Joseph. The father when he generates a son, does not only transmit the physical and biological life but all the tradition and the spirituality of his people, well all this precious chapter of history finishes with Joseph. With Jesus, there is a new creation.

So, let's see what this week's liturgy will tell us, it is Matthew 1, 18-24: "*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.*" literally this is the genesis of Jesus Christ, the evangelist reminds us with the words and terms of the first book in the Bible, he wants to indicate that in Jesus there is a new creation, something new, something that had never happened before. "*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.*"

This is the genesis of Jesus Christ "*...his mother Mary.....*" she was not married: here also it must be understood what the matrimonial institution was like in the time of Jesus: the matrimony came in two parts; the first part was the betrothal, and the second, a year later, there was the wedding, so it was divided

into two parts. Here Mary and Joseph find themselves in the first part. They are already betrothed, already husband and wife, but they do not yet live together.

“When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together... “ therefore before passing into the second part, that of the cohabitation in the family house, *“..she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.”* What is it that the evangelist wants to say with this statement ? First of all let’s see the words: in Jewish the word spirit, *“ruah”, is feminine, in Greek “pneuma”* it is neuter Therefore the evangelist avoids completely any reference to those stories, which were frequent in the Gentile world, of the gods who copulated with girls. Here it is not the copulating of a male and female, for this the Evangelist uses the neutral word, but what is the Holy Spirit? God’s creative force. That which is born in Jesus is the same force that gave life at the beginning of the creation. In the book of Genesis, to which Matthew refers, *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth..... And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. “ (Genesis 1,1)”* Now , once again God’s Spirit hovered over this creature.

“And her husband Joseph, being a just man.. “ just does not have our moral significance, just mean observant of all the rules and requirements of the law, *“...and unwilling to put her to shame,..”* already in the first part of the matrimony, the groom and bride were husband and wife, so in the case of adultery, the woman was stoned. Well Joseph is in a dilemma, and this drama in the apocryphal books, in the Protoevangelium of James, it is expressed very effectively. There is Joseph that states: *“.. if I hide her error I find myself in conflict with the law of the Lord.”* So Joseph is in front of a drama: he is a faithful observer of the law, the law that commands the exposure and the death of a unfaithful adulterous woman, but he cannot bring himself to do it. *“... he resolved to divorce her quietly.”* A divorce at that time was very easy, it was a piece of paper on which the husband simply wrote: *“from today you are no more my wife”,* he gave it to her and she went away. The reasons for divorce were many, and so there was not any problem and it was this that Joseph was thinking of doing.

“But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream,.. “ it is the first time that the phrase *“ angel of the Lord”* appears in Matthew’s gospel . God, in the Jewish culture, was distant to mankind, and, when he had to intervene into the life of mankind, he never presented himself personally with his divinity, but through this formula *“the angel of the Lord”*. *“The angel of the Lord”* does not mean an angel sent by God, but God himself when he enters into contact or communicates with mankind.

And why in a dream ? The dream in the book of Numbers one reads *“ if there is a prophet among you, I Yahweh, the Lord, reveal myself to him in a vision, I will speak with him in a dream “(Numbers 12, 6)* God in fact is distant from mankind, he does not manifest himself directly, only through dreams. This *“angel of the Lord”* is the first time that it appears, and will appear three times in this gospel, and always for life. Here is the first time, God that communicates life, then he will appear to defend life from the murderous plots of Herod, and then, at the moment of the resurrection, to confirm that life, when it comes from God, it is indestructible.

“...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.” Here there is God's reassurance that Mary is no adulteress, she did not betray Joseph, but in her something new is being created, it is a new creation that is taking form in Mary. *“She will bear a son,..”* she will give birth *“... and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”* Here the evangelist makes a connection between the name of Jesus, and save the people from their sins. This , is not possible to understand in our language. But in Jewish yes: Jesus in Jewish is *“Jeshuà”* and the verb to save, future tense, will save, is *“joshuà”*; therefore in Jewish there is a play of words: he will be called- Jesus in fact joshuà, will save his people. We must use the expression: he will be called Saviour ,

because he will save his people from their sins.

Matthew is the only evangelist that, in the Last Supper, add the words that Jesus' blood is given to cancel, for the remission of sins, the sins are not the faults, failings of men, sin is a negative past, a past that does not conform to the desire of God.

"All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:...." and it refers to the seventh chapter of Isaiah, verse 14, where the prophet tells the king Ahaz, announcing the birth of a son, the future King Hezekiah.

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us) and here is the point where the evangelist wants to bring us, the theme of all his theology, of all his gospel, the great novelty that Jesus will bring, the God that becomes man, that means God with us. Why this theme ? Because it appears here at the beginning, about halfway through the gospel, and then at the end of this gospel with Jesus' words *"... I am with you always.."* (Matthew 28,20) This is the novelty that Jesus brings us: not a distant God, but a God with us. So, God is with us, he is not a God that we must search for, but to welcome and with him and like him, go towards mankind. While the first humanity lived for God, and was orientated towards God, the goal was God, now humanity with Jesus lives of God and with Him and like Him, carries the wave of love to every creature.

"When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife....." so Joseph is presented as just in the true sense of the word, who, even going beyond the requirements of the tradition of the law, is in keeping with the word of God and observes it, even when it goes against their customs and religious rules. But thanks to the omission of the observance of the law, the Holy Spirit broke through and was able to form a new life, the life of Jesus.