

Sermon and readings for the 4th Sunday of Advent Yr. A

[Isaiah 7:10-16](#)

[Psalm 80 1-8,18-20](#)

[Romans 1:1-7](#)

[Matthew 1:18-end](#)

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock, and our Redeemer.

So today we have a tension between the words of Isaiah and the words of Matthew's Gospel, Was it a young woman or was it a Virgin that is considered by many to have conceived Jesus? Academic reputations may be built or lost on attitudes to this issue, and some have gone so far as to claim that Jesus was the result of Mary being raped by a Roman soldier. Sadly, raping people is by no means a new way of oppressing the civilian population. The problem seems to originate in the translation from the original Hebrew which the Isaiah passage follows, where the words used simply mean 'a young woman' to the Greek of the Septuagint where the word used specifically means 'a Virgin'. The answer has to be that we simply don't know and perhaps can't know, and ignorance may, in this case, be for the best. Those of you who are avid readers of that journal 'The Church Times' may recall a recent article by John Barton in which he illustrated the problems which confront the translator, though this was not the example he chose to illustrate his point. Better Theologians than I have struggled with the issue of the Virgin Birth, including William Barclay in his 1967 paperback 'The Plain Man looks at The Apostles Creed' in which he concludes the chapter on this issue by saying 'In this story let each of us both intelligently and prayerfully choose our own interpretation, and let us regard with sympathy and understanding those who choose another way of finding God's truth in it'. Amen to his Liberal Thoughts

Some of you may remember my wariness of Creeds which were sometimes forced upon the Church from outside by powers which had other issues to deal with. It may of course be that the change in translation is God inspired in which case 'all bets are off' and you can justify almost anything by appealing to God. Along with my worry about Creeds goes a worry about the tendency of early Christians to go looking for texts which predicted the coming of Jesus., Prophets tended to speak into their own times and circumstances, not about the far, in their time, future.

So, having spent a while on this matter, what of the rest of our readings? Isaiah is writing of a time when King Ahaz, who is counted as one of the bad Kings for his neglect of the worship of GOD, made a choice (against Isaiah's advice) to become a vassal state of the Assyrians under their king Tiglath Pilaser III. It is possibly in reference to one of King Ahaz's wives that the passage 'the young woman is with child and shall bear a son' occurs here. The food that the Child eats is perhaps all that was available in a land devastated by war, and the two kings, whose land was devastated, were the rulers of Syria and the Northern Kingdom, commonly known as

Israel, for it has to be said that the Assyrians were Not Nice People and are often held responsible for the disappearance of the 10 northern tribes.

In the Romans reading Paul is establishing his credentials, for the section which we have just heard is only the opening of Romans, a very important work, in which Paul establishes who he is.

In the Gospel you may feel moved to remember the Magnificat, Mary's song, in response to our Gospel though it is more commonly associated with the annunciation, and it is used as a Canticle in Evening Prayer and can be found in different Hymn versions, including one sung to a tune more often used at the end of Labour Party Conferences! Joseph would have indeed been a Righteous man, for the penalty for adultery was death by stoning, I think it was the late Professor John Hull who introduced me to the idea that the Apostles Creed contains one of the Most Significant Commas, as it completely omits Jesus' call to social justice, something the Iona community is concerned with.

John Parkin