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Anguish and Joy in God's Service

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Anguish and Joy in God's Service

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

Sunday Readings for December 22, 2013 for Cycle A:

Is 7:10-14; Ps 24; Rom 1:1-7; Mt 1:18-24

ANGUISH AND JOY IN GOD'S SERVICE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

O let thy sacred will
All thy delight in me fulfil
Let me not think an action mine own way,
But as thy love shall sway,
Resigning up the rudder to thy skill

- George Herbert, "Obedience"

This prayer might be on the lips of any adult who recognizes the overwhelming demands of responsibility in the face of adversity. It echoes biblical themes (see Ps 40:6-8) and thus its message links us with the past. Ahaz, king of Judah from 735-715 B.C., was a young ruler in Jerusalem when enemies in Aram (Syria) and the Northern Kingdom of Israel conspired against him. Did he recall that the Davidic dynasty was but the viceroy of God? A prayer acknowledging dependence would have been appropriate at the beginning of every day, but especially in time of danger. Resignation need not imply mere passivity, but the ship of state should not depend merely on human wisdom and prowess. Ahaz might have used thoughts attributed to David: "In my distress I called upon the LORD and cried out to my God. From his Temple he heard my voice and my cry reached his ears" (Ps 18:7).

Joseph Conrad considered that "the captain of the ship at sea is a remote, inaccessible creature," but the kings of Judah were approached by God's messengers, often in spite of themselves. The aristocratic prophet Isaiah was sent to Ahaz with divine assurance. "Take care that you remain tranquil and do not fear; let not your courage fail before these two stumps of smoldering firebrands... Unless your faith is firm, you shall not be firm" (Is 7:4 and 9). Although faith in many ways illuminates human understanding, there are situations when child-like trust in a time of darkness is fundamental to our relationship with God. However, Ahaz was offered a sign to bolster his strength. "The young woman shall be with child and bear a son and shall name him Immanuel (God is with us)." Rather than the proclamation of a distant Messiah, the original message responded to an urgent need. A new wife of Ahaz would produce an heir; before he would reach the age of reason the two enemies would disappear (Is 7:14-16).

Because of the significant title "Immanuel" (see Isa. 8:10) and writings of Isaiah describing a marvelously effective successor to David (9:5-6; 11:1-10), Jews reflected upon deeper dimensions of this passage. A century or so before Jesus, translators in Alexandria, Egypt rendered the Hebrew word for "young woman" into Greek as *parthenos* or virgin. This heightened the implications of the text for the Jews of the Dispersion, who were well aware that the Davidic dynasty no longer ruled in Jerusalem. However, the God who protected his people in the time of Ahaz was indeed

always present with them. Like the Exodus, the sign of "Immanuel" was recognized as a type or foreshadowing of greater wonders in the future.

As the early Church learned about the preparation for the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' death-and-resurrection, the faithful came to know the mystery of the Incarnation. Jesus, Son of God descended from David according to the flesh (human nature) was conceived of a virgin. Saints Matthew and Luke, familiar with the Bible in Greek, recognized that this text of Isaiah was singularly appropriate for reinforcing faith in the unique birth and nature of Jesus. Indeed he is Immanuel, giving this title a new fullness of meaning.

Popular piety has tended to idealize the Christmas crib scene, but the Gospel emphasizes that Mary and Joseph came to the peace of Bethlehem by persevering through a cloud of suspicion and doubt. How Mary can empathize with the misunderstood wife! Kind as Joseph was, his very uprightness seemed to demand that he not take paternal responsibility that was not his. Did Mary protest her innocence? Probably she reflected silently: "Let me not think out a solution in my own way." Finally, Joseph was reminded of his Davidic pedigree and told that the child was conceived by the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Mary thus became the sign of the Church giving new life to the world when people are born from above of water and the Spirit (see Jn 3:5-8). Unlike Ahaz, she exhibited a faith that blossomed into loving obedience, letting God's will fulfil all divine delight in her.