

Fourth Sunday of Advent Year A

December 21-22, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-14; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24

Located on the Via Salaria, the “Salt Road,” the Catacombs of St. Priscilla are rarely on the list of pilgrim attractions in Rome. There are just too many other things to do and see. It’s a shame– it should be. Among the treasures to be found in this underground burial site adjacent to a Benedictine convent of nuns is the oldest known image of the Blessed Mother dating to the early third century.

Though largely deteriorated, it is possible to discern both Mary and the baby Jesus on her lap. A third figure stands off to the side, pointing towards Mary, “On the left side of the scene stands [...]a prophet, holding the scroll of the Scriptures in his left hand and pointing toward the Virgin with his right index finger.”¹ Most scholars believe it represents the prophet Isaiah. If so, it is because of the very passage you heard in our first reading today. He could equally be pointing to the star of Bethlehem.

Mary for her part, “clothed in a stole and short veil, is seated in an attitude of meditation, with her head inclined slightly forward, toward her right shoulder.” A tree with branches is visible, recalling the “rod of Jesse” of Isaiah chapter 11 and which the church’s liturgy states: “The rod of Jesse hath blossomed; a Virgin has brought forth love and man.”²

In this and similar depictions of Mary, we see early traces of the Marian devotion of the people. Art is a powerful witness as it speaks first not to the ears, but to the heart through its lines, shapes and colors. The star may be the light that Isaiah describes: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (Isaiah 60:1-3).

¹ Luigi Gambero, “Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought,” Page 83-85. Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1999. This figure could be the prophet Balaam (Num. 24:15-17): “A star shall rise out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall spring up from Israel.” Once a quarry in Roman times for material used in building, the Catacombs of Priscilla were used from the late second century through the fourth century.

² Cf. The Graduale “Virga Jesse floruit,” from the Roman Breviary.

However, the backdrop to the prophecy was quite different, occurring 700 years before Jesus. Two northern kingdoms, Syria with its capital at Damascus and Israel with its capital at Samaria were on the verge of invading the southern kingdom of Judah. The king was ready to declare himself and his kingdom as a vassal of Assyria and pay a heavy tribute.

In steps Isaiah to offer God's word. Isaiah's answer was as simple as it was stunning—do nothing but trust in God. Your dynasty will survive, and he announces the birth of Immanuel, who will inherit the throne not through political maneuvers, but solely by the Lord's direction. God alone saves. Isaiah's sign seeks to reassure Ahaz that in the light of God's promise to David, he need not fear the invading Assyrians.³

For Christians, the incarnation is the ultimate expression of God's willingness to "be with us." This is the major reason why the text has been interpreted to refer to the birth of Christ. The focus has shifted now from John the Baptist to Mary's role in our salvation. This message of Isaiah finds a place in Mary who herself bore Immanuel, God-with-us.

Israel and indeed the whole world would not be saved through politics, but also solely through the power of God. We see in the prophecy of Isaiah a foreshadowing of the birth of Christ, through whom the gates of God's eternal kingdom are opened. To whom do we look to save?

We look East. We look to the star and we heed the call of the prophets. We trust not in our power, much less in the power of any government, and political party or any program. We place our trust in the saving message proclaimed by the prophets. The Lord indeed has given us a sign. The final pieces are put in place on this fourth Sunday. Mary plays a central role and rightfully so. May she continue to lead us to her Son.

³ Just a quick note about a particular word used today. Hebrew *'almah* designates a young woman of marriageable age without specific reference to virginity. The later Greek version of the Old Testament Septuagint translated that Hebrew term as *parthenos*, which does mean virgin, and it is this translation that underlies the passage as quoted in Saint Matthew's Gospel (Mt1:23).