

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7,18-19; Matthew 1:18-25

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Love.

Today's readings speak of God's love for us, of how he promised us through the prophet Isaiah, that a virgin would conceive and bear a son, whose name would be known as "Emmanuel", "God with us", and how this special child would save and deliver his people.

The Gospel reading tells us how that promise came true through the child of Mary; and of how Joseph, out of his love for God and his obedience to God's word, took Mary for his wife and did all that the angel commanded him to do, thereby giving a home and family to the one who was to be called Jesus, Emmanuel.

Today as we await the birth of Jesus, God's gift of love to us, let us listen to a fable and afterward listen to a few comments about what love is like.

First the fable: "Once upon a time there lived a fisherman and his wife. Their home was a humble two roomed cottage with a tiny garden and a well for drinking water. Every day the fisherman would go out in his little boat and in the evening bring home his catch, sometimes good, sometimes poor. This was their livelihood. But the fisherman's wife was discontented.

"Why should I have to live in this hovel? Is it too much to expect a decent home with water and electricity and a kitchen? I wish I was a lady." Her continual grouching made the fisherman quite miserable.

One day, something happened which changed their lives. The man caught a strange and beautiful fish which startled him by

speaking. "Please throw me back into the sea and I'll grant whatever you wish." The fisherman thought a bit and then replied, "So be it. I wish my wife was a lady and lived in a proper house with water, electricity and a kitchen." When he returned that evening he found that his wish had been granted, and his wife was very pleased. But as the months passed she began to grumble again, "Is it too much to expect something better than this pokey house? I wish I was a Duchess, with a mansion and servants and a carriage. Why did you ask for so little? I'm sure the fish meant us to do better than this."

Driven by her complaints and nagging, the fisherman tried to contact the fish again and rowed his boat to the spot. No sooner had he called than the fish appeared and agreed to his request.

But the duchess was still not satisfied. Within a month she was grumbling and complaining again. "I wish I was a queen, go and see your fish again". And so he did. Life in the palace was luxurious, but the fisherman's wife, now a queen, wasn't content for long. "What I would really like" she said, "is to be God. I'm sure your fish will understand that this is what I wanted all along."

When the man returned from fishing that day, he found no palace on the shore, no mansion, not even his little old cottage was there. But then he heard crying, and noticing a cave in the cliff face, he went closer. Inside it was fashioned into a rough stable. There were 2 oxen and a donkey. And in the manger a little baby lay crying." The fisherman's wife had her wish. The wife had, of course, forgotten what God is like in this world, in human flesh. She'd forgotten about Christmas and the Passion of Christ. She'd forgotten about the manger and the cross. She'd forgotten that our God is a God who comes, and who identifies with the poorest and the most humble of people,

in order to give us heaven.

God was born as a baby in Bethlehem, knowing full well that the cross would follow as surely as night follows day. Greater love has no one than this, that they lay down their life for their friends. This is the love of Christmas, God laid aside his throne, and in Jesus became one of us, like us in every way; and being one of us, he further humbled himself and gave his life for us. Love is the most important part of the Christmas story. It is the love of God that brings to us the hope and the peace and the joy that we need. And it is our love for one another in Christ's name, that makes Christmas worthwhile.

As we finish our preparations for Christmas, let us listen to a paraphrase of First Corinthians Thirteen which goes like this: If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another decorator. If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another cook. If I volunteer at the church, sing carols in the seniors home, and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love to my family, it profits me nothing. If I trim the Christmas tree with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend numerous holiday parties, and sing in the choir, but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.

The point is, Love stops the cooking to hug the child. Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the spouse. Love is kind, though harried and tired. Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens. Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way. Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return, but rejoices in giving to those

who can't. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. Video games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust. But giving the gift of love will endure. Indeed, that is what Christmas is all about. The gift of love.

By way of conclusion, listen to the words written as a Christmas Greeting by a clergy person in Florida, the same year that he and his wife had a daughter born to them with Downs Syndrome. It goes like this: "Into a world of strength and pride a child is born, weak and humble, having no power except that power which alone can conquer all things, Love. Such was, and is, Christmas."

AMEN.