

**Isaiah 35:1-6. 10; Ps 145:6-10; James 5:7-10; Matt 11:2-11**

Prophecies are interesting. The promise God gives to King Ahaz is fulfilled just over 700 years later through the Virgin Mary. 700 years is quite a long time span between promise and its delivery. Attempts have been made, of course, to show that the prophecy spoken of to Ahaz by Isaiah could have been about a different event than the birth of Jesus, but none have been convincing. The coming of Jesus alone seems to stand out like a beacon as the prophecy's fulfilment.

I cannot tell you why God let such a long time elapse between promise and fulfilment, but I can tell you a little about the circumstances of both.

Ahaz was King of Judea from around the period 721 to 709 BC. Judea is the tiny southern kingdom left over after being torn apart by civil war after King Solomon's reign. Judea is in some political and military trouble. Syria and Israel, having both already fought and defeated Ahaz, independently of each other, have now combined forces to make war against Judea and to take the throne away from the house of David – Ahaz and his descendants - permanently. It is in this dire situation that God speaks to King Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah.

God says to Ahaz, just prior to the passage we have before us: *'Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint... It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass.'*<sup>1</sup> And then to bolster Ahaz's courage the LORD says to Ahaz *'Ask a sign of the LORD your God.'* Ahaz responds: *'I will not put the Lord to the test.'*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 7: 3-8

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 7:12

<sup>3</sup> Deut 6:16, (As they did in the wilderness.

This sounds sensible. You might think that Ahaz is being humble, a good attitude to have before God. In the book of Deuteronomy Moses tell the people *'you shall not put the LORD your God to the test.'*<sup>3</sup> Much later, Jesus himself will quote this text when he responds to the devil's temptation with a similar response, *'You shall not test the Lord your God.'*<sup>4</sup> But Ahaz is not being humble before God. He simply does not trust God will save him, and he puts his trust in his own cunning. What he means when he says 'I will not put the LORD to the test.' is: 'I will not ask God for a sign which, when received, will then oblige me to do what he says. Instead, I will deal with the problem myself'.

Ahaz ignores God, raises up altars to foreign gods, and tries to make a treaty with the king of Assyria to defend Judea her enemies. This will end up with Judea will become a vassal - or servant - state of Assyria. However, God has promised a sign of hope to Ahaz despite Ahaz's unbelief, because God is making the promise to his people not the man: *'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.'*<sup>5</sup>

Over the span of time things go better and then worse for Judea. Eventually the kingdom absorbed into the Roman Empire and re-named Palestine, in an effort to remove every vestige of her existence. And then Mary is betrothed to Joseph.

If you read the opening passage of Matthew's gospel, which is the genealogy of Jesus, you will pass the name of David the king. Remember, and carry on. Among the names that follow is that of Ahaz. Remember what he has done and his response to God. Then read on until you arrive

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 4:7,

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 7:14

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at Joseph. Joseph is the in the ancestral line of King David, just as Ahaz is. It is into this line that Mary is to be married, she is, as it were, spliced into the family tree. She now is of the line of David.

Mary becomes the sign of redemption for the Jewish people, and for the line of king David. She is not redemption, she is the sign of redemption, which means that she points to him. She places herself at the disposal of God, as opposed to Ahaz who wished to forge his own way. She is starting the undoing of the long list of man 'no's' to God. She is the virgin that will bear a son named Emmanuel, 'which means *'God with us'*'. That is to say Jesus.

Why did God wait 700 years to fulfil the prophecy? Maybe he waited until all hope was extinct, when the very name of Judea and hope of kings after David had been erased to enter into the world. Maybe he wanted the perfect response of humility to be ready for him. Perfect it seems to be. And now, as we await to celebrate the birth of Jesus, I wish to bring that perfection into my life and be illuminated by it, filled to overflowing by it. It has been present for 2000 years, and yet still we respond like Ahaz, like little people who want to be great but have no belief. I will not be Ahaz's echo. I will be Mary. I believe in the prophecy fulfilled and the salvation it brings. I will rejoice at Christmas before the crib.