

FOURTH SUNDAY  
OF ADVENT

YEAR A

**Prayer**

*Psalm 24:1-6*

The earth is the LORD's  
and all that is in it,  
the world, and those  
who live in it; for he has  
founded it on the seas, and  
established it on the rivers.

Who shall ascend the hill  
of the LORD?

And who shall stand in his  
holy place?

Those who have clean  
hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their  
souls to what is false,  
and do not swear  
deceitfully.

They will receive blessing  
from the LORD, and  
vindication from the God  
of their salvation.

Such is the company of  
those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the  
God of Jacob.

**Reading the Word**

*First Reading: Isaiah 7:10-14*

Again the Lord spoke to  
Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of  
the Lord your God; let it  
be deep as Sheol or high as  
heaven. But Ahaz said, I will  
not ask, and I will not put the  
Lord to the test. Then Isaiah  
said: "Hear then, O house of  
David! Is it too little for you  
to weary mortals, that you

weary my God also? There-  
fore the Lord himself will give  
you a sign. Look, the young  
woman is with child and shall  
bear a son, and shall name  
him Immanuel.

*Second Reading: Romans 1:1-7*

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ,  
called to be an apostle, set  
apart for the gospel of God,  
which he promised before-  
hand through his prophets  
in the holy scriptures, the  
gospel concerning his Son,  
who was descended from  
David according to the flesh  
and was declared to be Son  
of God with power accord-  
ing to the spirit of holiness by  
resurrection from the dead,  
Jesus Christ our Lord, through  
whom we have received  
grace and apostleship to  
bring about the obedience  
of faith among all the Gen-  
tiles for the sake of his name,  
including yourselves who  
are called to belong to Jesus  
Christ, to all God's beloved  
in Rome, who are called to  
be saints: Grace to you and  
peace from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Gospel: Matthew 1:18-24*

Now the birth of Jesus the  
Messiah took place in this way.  
When his mother Mary had

been engaged to Joseph, but  
before they lived together,  
she was found to be with  
child from the Holy Spirit.  
Her husband Joseph, being  
a righteous man and unwill-  
ing to expose her to public  
disgrace, planned to dismiss  
her quietly. But just when he  
had resolved to do this, an  
angel of the Lord appeared  
to him in a dream and said,  
"Joseph, son of David, do not  
be afraid to take Mary as  
your wife, for the child con-  
ceived in her is from the Holy  
Spirit. She will bear a son, and  
you are to name him Jesus,  
for he will save his people  
from their sins." All this took  
place to fulfill what had been  
spoken by the Lord through  
the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall con-  
ceive and bear a son, and  
they shall name him Emman-  
uel,"

which means, "God is with  
us." When Joseph awoke from  
sleep, he did as the angel of  
the Lord commanded him;  
he took her as his wife.

*Scripture quotations from  
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## Hearing the Word

### *"What's in the Name?"*

The liturgy of the Fourth Sunday of Advent brings together some of the best-known biblical passages. A theme that links these readings is that of the significance conveyed through one's name. In the biblical sense, a name is more than a designation, it is a word that both identifies and defines the person. To know someone's name is equivalent to knowing their identity, and, therefore, their mission and purpose in life. Therefore, naming someone, or a change of a name, are biblically very significant and meaningful events.

To understand the first reading properly we must set Isaiah's message to king Ahaz in its historical context. It was a time of great distress for all Israelites. Ahaz and his kingdom were facing military aggression from several kings ruling neighbouring states. Their aim was to remove Ahaz, and to seize his kingdom and his army. Initially, they wanted Ahaz to join their common fight against the approaching Assyrians. When Ahaz refused to do so, they turned against him. The Israelite king was terrified, and made preparations for a hopeless fight. As he was inspecting the water supply for the soon-to-be-besieged city, Isaiah met him with a message of consolation. The prophet assured the king that the faithful God of Israel would not allow his beloved city, Jerusalem, to be overrun by its enemies, and that Ahaz is secure on the throne. To reassure him further, the Lord was willing to

provide the king with a sign. But Ahaz refused to ask for a sign! This refusal had a reason. Ahaz did not trust God, and had already decided to take matters into his own hands and ensure his own survival without any appeal to God. He decided to appeal for help to the Assyrians. The Assyrians willingly responded to his plea and defeated Ahaz's enemies. However, the price for their assistance and protection, was steep, Ahaz had to accept Assyrian authority and to become their vassal and servant. This meant relinquishing the autonomy of the kingdom and the adoption of the Assyrian religion, which Ahaz duly did. Following Assyrian instructions, he remodelled the Jerusalem Temple, turning it into an Assyrian temple where their state gods were worshiped. He became an apostate, an idolatrous king. All Israelite religious symbols were removed from the Temple, and God had been effectively evicted from his own temple! Jerusalem became a pagan city and Judah an Assyrian province. Israelites effectively ceased to be the people of Yahweh (cf. 1 Kings 16).

Isaiah's prophecy about the birth of a child was delivered in this context. The child in question was Ahaz's own son, soon to be born of his young pregnant wife. This child was to be an ordinary human being destined to serve an extraordinary purpose revealed by a symbolic name given to him – "Emmanuel", which means, "God is with us." Indeed, Ahaz, an idolatrous king, had a son whose name was Hezekiah. At

the first opportune moment, Hezekiah shook off the yoke of the Assyrian occupation and conducted an extensive religious reform. First, destroying all Assyrian features, he returned Jerusalem Temple to its proper function as the place of worship of the God of Israel. He removed from the land all places where foreign gods were worshiped thus returning the people to their God. Thus, Hezekiah brought back the country and the people to their ancestral faith. The name given to him by Isaiah, "Emmanuel", perfectly reflects the purpose for which he was born. Through him, God was restored to his Temple, and Israelites were restored to their God. Thanks to Hezekiah, the Emmanuel, the Israelites could once again say, "God is with us."

The second reading is the opening section of Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul's original Hebrew name, "Saul", was changed after his encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus. This encounter changed Paul's life. Saul, a persecutor of Christians and an enemy of Christ, became "Paul", who defined his new identity and the meaning of this name change through three phrases: "a slave of Jesus Christ", "an apostle" and "set apart for the Gospel of God." Paul used these three phrases to comprehensively outline his identity and mission. First, Paul belongs to Christ totally, to the point of seeing himself as "a slave" or "a servant." He considered being a "servant" as a privilege, not a form of forceful and unwanted enslavement.

ment. As an “apostle”, he was a man sent on a mission, which defined the way he lived. Paul became an emissary of God, a pilgrim, a man in constant movement to bring the Gospel to the furthest reaches of the ancient world. Finally, he was set apart for the Gospel of God, which defined his life purpose. His fate and entire life were to be focused on the proclamation of God’s Gospel. He had been destined, set apart, for this specific task by God himself. Paul was single-mindedly devoted to carrying out God’s work of spreading the Gospel in the world. Indeed, he became famous for his utter dedication and uncompromising commitment to this mission.

Describing the birth of Jesus, Matthew focused on the naming of this newly born child. Joseph, a righteous man, “adopted” Jesus, knowing him to be conceived by the Holy Spirit. He did this formally by giving the child a name which had been revealed to him by an angel. The child’s name, in Joseph’s native tongue was “Yeshua”, which means “God saves.” This name, which we today translate as “Jesus”, means that this newly born child’s life purpose would be to bringing God’s salvation into the world. Through Jesus, God will save the world! The name says it all. The salvific mission of Jesus would not be an isolated episode in history. This is why Matthew clearly stated that Jesus, in his saving work, will continue what God had already started with Hezekiah, the original Emmanuel. Like

Hezekiah, Jesus’ work of salvation will be about restoring the people to their God, and about mending the divine – human relationship broken by sin. He will “save the people from their sin”, which means that Jesus will remove the barrier of sin that prevents humanity from relating to God and being God’s people. While Hezekiah restored the Temple and the people of Israel to God in the distant past, Jesus, the new Emmanuel, will restore the whole humanity to God.

Names carry meanings that define life’s purposes. Hezekiah, Paul and Jesus, each played a very particular and significant role in God’s project of saving the world. Hezekiah ensured that the faith in the one true God did not die in the time of the Assyrian crisis, some 700 years before Jesus’ birth. Jesus, God’s own son, brought salvation to humanity through his cross, where he removed the alienating effects of sin. Paul became an apostle of this good news, caring it out to the whole world, and establishing communities of believers. Those who accepted this message of salvation entered into this new relationship with God through Jesus Christ, they became Christians. This meaningful name describes people who belong to God through Christ. Indeed, Christians are also the ones to whom the Psalmist referred to as those who “receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation.”

## Listening to the Word of God

Names are very important in human history and in every culture. In many traditional societies parents and relatives give a newborn baby not just an abstract name with no meaning, but a name that describes the circumstances of their birth and well wishes for the child. Most names in indigenous languages have a meaning that expresses these sentiments. Other ways in which we see the importance of names is the naming of buildings and roads. Most countries which were colonized by foreign powers, after gaining independence change their names, and rename cities, places and streets, giving them names of persons who led the independence struggle, or other meaningful names that express the identity of the nation. With these new names for towns, buildings and roads the liberators hope to change the history and memory of the people.

Sometimes adults change their names, as is frequently done by athletes and artists who adopt new names to highlight their style, ability or simply to make themselves appealing to their audiences. Some change names to take on those of their heroes. In some cases, people give nicknames to others to express their characters. Many missionaries working were given local names that reflected the essential characteristics of their work and mission. People in love, express their love and affection through affectionate names. Some-



times people give derogatory names to other ethnic groups or persons who are different, which may have negative consequences. Many of us were given names of saints when we were baptized. But how many of us know the stories of the saints whose name we bear, what their names mean for us? In the Bible, names were very important as seen in the readings of today. Without a doubt, naming is a powerful exercise.

In our relationship with God, we often use labels that keep us in a particular place and stop us from getting deeper in our relationship with God. For example, because of an emphasis on sin in our faith, the label “sinner” becomes the first thing we think about in our relationship with God. Indeed, we do not want to get rid of this name because it is part of who we are. But we are also given other names by God and Jesus. Jesus calls us friends, brothers and sisters, beloved and redeemed. God calls us “beloved children”, precious, valuable and those chosen to reflect God’s image. We bear these names and designations that reflect our wonderful call and identity – to be beloved children of God destined for salvation because our Lord is Jesus, “God saves.” These are amazingly transformative names. Many of us may have allowed negative names given to us by others to distort who we truly are because of belonging to a particular racial or ethnic group, class or sex. This is not just about us but also our brothers and sisters in our parish and in our commu-

nities. Imagine how the atmosphere in your local Church, family and community would change if we started to use our God-given names as our vocabulary and guide to understanding who we are as individuals and groups. Doing so might change our orientation in dealing, responding and interacting with all people.

### Proverb

“You  
cannot  
name  
the  
good  
within  
yourself,  
if you  
cannot  
see it in  
others.”

### Action

#### Self-examination

Reflect on the meaning of your name(s). How have these meanings affected you, and how do they reflect who you are?

What name would you give to yourself if you were to define yourself and your life purpose?

#### Response to God

Offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for what God has made you, above all for making you His beloved child destined for salvation.

#### Response to your World

If you were to choose one name that reflects your identity, what would it be? What changes in your life should you make if you were to live up to this name? Act accordingly.

What would be the name that reflects the group you are a part of now? Is it the name you would be proud of?

### Prayer

Thank you, dear Lord, for all the names that refer to me in the Bible.

Yes, I am a sinner but also your beloved child.

May I extend this to all I encounter and allow this to make me an agent of love wherever I am.