

## Isaiah 7:10-16

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? Therefore 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.

He shall eat curds and honey **by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.** For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.”

## The Gospel

### Matthew 1:18-25

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 unwilling 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 conceived 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 fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:**

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

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, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and ***he*** named ***him*** Jesus.

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Here I am once more in the Flow Country. The land that was despised and rejected, the reverend care of which is now a headline part of our response to a far greater threat than lack of profit. Or even employment. This is the stone the builders rejected, become a chief cornerstone of policy on climate action. Because of a change of mind. A change of story. A change of values. Bible’s full of that, and perhaps even more, the living tradition of our faith, under the guidance of the Spirit.

Read but a verse in Isaiah beyond that quoted by Matthew as fulfilment, and you either recoil or laugh at the roguery of it, *or* begin to grasp once more what a divine gift is Christian scripture along with similar traditions which *connect* with similarity and analogy, without the need for pernicky precision.

To resource our response to what more than just threatens to overwhelm us. To learn from communities who, in faith, and again and again, faced the end of their world. Yet by grace, with no guarantees, passed through it.

Over and over again though, it's a close run thing - indeed, like the survival of the Christ-child himself. Disasters do leave scars. The burning bush is not fireproof, but blazing. The traveller saved by the Good Samaritan is seriously injured. All we're told about the house on the rock, is that it didn't collapse, rather than that it escaped serious flood damage. [Matt 7:25]. We still have forests after Storm Arwen last year. But we have 16 million fewer trees. Salvation, or deliverance, is more often than not by the skin of your teeth. Which is cause both for hope and for alertness. Certainly not for complacency.

And here on the bog, there's a vast landscape of tiny wee plants, quietly and beautifully getting on as they have for millennia, with the job of those expensive headline-grabbing carbon capture devices which

provide a plastic fig-leaf of greenwashing whilst fresh oil and gas exploration dashes so unwisely ahead.

For Matthew, Prophecy is fulfilled in recycling. By testing it against a new and meaningfully similar situation. That's why it's the extremes of Advent that speak powerfully to dwellers on an endangered planet.

And that's what transforms the spiritual advice ignored by an undistinguished king of Judah, to an attestation of his far from royal descendant Jesus as a sign from God twenty or more generations later. Nonsense, or a miracle, or something akin to both. The Earth as Suffering Servant.

This is poetry, not science. It's subject to different disciplines. But disciplines nonetheless of justice, responsibility and integrity. The names of the infants: Jesus [God saves] and Emmanuel [God with us] are not identical, but meaningfully close enough to be identified when brought together with inspired intent. That, for Matthew, is sufficient *bonus of meaning* to reassure his first community of hard-pressed hearers. Jesus is about you. **You have permission to take notice**; you have *permission* to let go of some things

and take up others. And it is for your good, and the good of fellow creatures. And it is part of the divinely commissioned good news to every creature, from the risen Christ that you do so.

Faithfulness and piety persevere. By being redefined.

Am I going too far?

Not if we're living in a chronic emergency. As our friends in the Pacific and elsewhere assure me we are. Not if we're deluged, as we are, with signs of the times which grant permission with integrity to look again, affirm some things, move on from others.

And as for the speed at which we need to move:

People talk of a glacial pace of change: but even glaciers, or at least the speed at which they're receding looks set to surpass that way of working which considers, sets up a committee, reports, and kicks the can down the road into the long grass.

Here in the flow country, less than forty years ago, folk were being paid to dig drainage ditches and plant trees; destroying the beauty of the habitat which for millennia had been a wilderness resilient against human usefulness. Jobs and profit drove them. Today they're filling in the same ditches. Rebogging, as it were, with insights and pressures of climate biting at our heels, which recognise the flow country as a

global treasure of carbon capture rather than a scandalous waste of space.

But it's also like those ancient works of art, which are no less revered for the damage filled in by restorers at the edges.

Traditional Christianity at its best has been at least as audacious in shaping pathways to welcome us, for all our imperfections, and yet also in our need, into that family of trust in God which does not evade or prevent crises.

Yet lovingly empowers responses which save lives and bring justice to creatures and communities who are despised and persecuted by those who claim to rule the world.

The Scottish Clearances, as our friend Alastair McIntosh has pointed out, were as much an abuse of the environment as of the peoples whose habitat that was.

Prophecy provoked by crises past becomes, through responsible discernment a resource for crises present. Crises *especially* with causes as *complex* and intractable as the injustice, greed and fear which continue to shackle our planet to the incontinent use of fuels which stuff our atmosphere today with greenhouse gases built of the carbon of millions of years ago, tipping off balance all the seasons and

cycles of migration we look to for stability and reassurance.

Yet to grasp this takes a leap. And a leap is a risk. As between stepping stones over a torrent, or across a bog with many metres of peat. Or like the legend of the soldier's leap at Killiecrankie, across a waterfall to save his life, over five metres, we may not know until we're compelled, what we're capable of. A leap of faith, of decency, of desperation. or, most likely a combination of these and more.

When the prophet came to King Ahaz, though it was in the aftermath of a terrifying siege, which *had* been repelled, the chance was passed: the King refused to recognise the fact of change. Realpolitik rather than vision served him well enough, in his own reign, but severely burdened the life of subsequent generations. Caution and a corrosive common sense were met by the sign of the young woman's child, picked up and run with by Matthew

Perhaps some of our rulers and even church leaders, though they've taken the first steps to lead us in response, are still cautious - *like Joseph, hesitant simply because of their very decency* to make a leap in the spirit rather than in the reassuringly observable letter of the law. Or even of existing church procedure. What, in the life of the churches and

nations, mitigates against dreams like Joseph's . Or do we so stuff our lives with dutiful busy-ness that we don't leave room for sleep, perchance to dream.

Whatever you think of King Ahaz - his response under pressure was on the surface to fall back on what he perceived to be the authority of Scripture: the law of Moses, not to put God to the test; the very verse weaponised by Jesus against Satan's Temptations of a starving human... in the wilderness.

In Advent can we ponder how and when to support - or to protest and challenge the directions we're led in. The ways we feel pushed or dragooned into ways which harm: into a life of those sins which the child to be born was sent to save us.

May the slowly healing scars of short-term profit in this powerful ancient landscape inspire openness to something beyond the same old solutions of money, celebrity and the growth of a single-use throwaway economy as if its costs would never catch up with us as with sisters and brothers hit first and hardest by what we think we have to do.