

The Sunday Gospel

Fourth Sunday of Advent (*Gaudete Sunday*)

(Lectionary Year A) Matthew 1:18-24

About today:

As Advent draws to its close, the first reading and the gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent invite us to trust God's quiet but decisive faithfulness.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God offers a sign not demanded but freely given: a child, Emmanuel, "God-with-us," born not through human calculation but divine promise. In the Gospel, Joseph stands before that same promise, now unfolding in his own fragile and confusing circumstances. His obedience – choosing trust over fear, faith over certainty – allows God's saving work to enter the world in an ordinary home and a vulnerable family. Together, these readings remind us that God's presence often comes not with spectacle, but through humble openness and courageous trust.

Gospel Reading

Read the whole passage slowly a few times, keeping one or two minutes of silence between each time.

^{1:18} 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.

¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.

Broader Picture:

Matthew's infancy narrative is less about sentiment and more about identity, obedience, and fulfilment of Israel's prophecies. It anchors Jesus firmly within Israel's story while announcing something radically new: God is now with his people in a way that will define the entire Gospel. Luke, by contrast, invites us to linger in wonder and praise. Together, they offer complementary windows into the same mystery.

Matthew opens his Gospel not with a scene, but with a genealogy (1:1–17), establishing Jesus firmly within the story of Israel: son of David, son of Abraham. This long list of names is not simply a preface, but a theological hinge between Israel's past and God's decisive action in Christ.

Interpretation Notes:

v. 18: "...took place in this way..." Matthew immediately frames the narrative christologically: this is the birth of the Messiah. But his words avoid embellishments; they emphasise the *truth* rather than the marvel.

v. 18: "...from the Holy Spirit..." Matthew highlights two elements: Mary's real betrothal and the divine origin of the child. These two emphasise that the virginal conception safeguards both Christ's true humanity (born of a woman) and true divinity (conceived by the Spirit).

The phrase "found to be with child" highlights the hiddenness of God's work—revealed gradually, not triumphantly. Saint Augustine of Hippo.

v. 19: "...a righteous man..." Joseph's righteousness (*dikaios*) is central. His righteousness wasn't just legalism but a deep alignment with God's will, showing merciful justice, integrity, and selfless love as Jesus's foster father and protector.

In Matthew, righteousness is not legal rigidity but attentive obedience to God's will; it means following justice and mercy together. So, in the case of Joseph, we see his righteousness at work even before the intervention of the angel: while the Law permitted stoning for a betrothed woman's infidelity, Joseph chose to divorce quietly out of love and mercy for Mary, not to shame her.

v.20: "...*Joseph, son of David...*" The angel addresses Joseph by his messianic identity. Saint Leo the Great highlights that Joseph's Davidic lineage matters not biologically but legally.

v.20: "...*the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit*" This is the second time in the space of three verses that Jesus' conception through the Holy Spirit is mentioned. Matthew doesn't want his listeners to be mistaken. The incarnation of Jesus, through Mary and the Holy Spirit, is the beginning of something completely new, unheard of. This is the new creation entering history.

v.21: "...*you are to name him Jesus...*" The angel foretells that the child is going to be male, which is a great prophecy in itself. Then he tells Joseph to name the child "Jesus" (or Yeshua, Yehoshua), meaning "YHWH saves". Saint John Chrysostom stresses that as Joseph names the child, he fully assumes legal fatherhood.

Importantly, naming confers authority and mission on the child, but Matthew specifies "from sins", not from political enemies, thus already charting a path to the Cross.

vv.22-23: "...*the virgin shall conceive...*" The coming of Jesus the Messiah is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, and this is Matthew's first fulfillment quotation (Isaiah 7:14). The evangelist deliberately quotes from the Septuagint (LXX, the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible) where the choice of words is highly important. The Hebrew '*almah* means "young woman" (with virginal connotations but not explicit). LXX renders this as *parthenos*, meaning "virgin," which becomes theologically decisive for understanding the incarnation.

v. 23: “...*Emmanuel ... God with us...*” The Church Fathers often link this verse with Matthew 28:20 at the end of the gospel narrative: what begins in the womb of Mary ends in the promise of the risen Christ to his disciples: “I will be with you to the end of time/end of the age”.

Emmanuel is not a title left behind by Jesus at Christmas or at his ascension; it defines the whole Gospel and indeed the very nature of the Church. Jesus is always with us through his Spirit and in the Blessed Sacrament.

v. 24: “...*he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...*” Joseph does not speak a word, instead he acts. Here we see his righteousness at work again as he shows himself to be completely attuned to God’s will, even when this is costly and it requires a lot of courage. Indeed, Joseph’s righteousness and his acceptance of the angel’s command allows the promises made to his ancestor David to pass into history, and to us.

The Venerable Bede sees here the essence of faith: obedience without demand for reassurance.

A side note: virginity and the Incarnation

Verse 25 states,

“But [Joseph] had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.”

This verse is not included in every lectionary because it potentially opens the debate about Mary’s virginity before and after the birth of Jesus (called the doctrine of “the perpetual virginity” of Mary). Indeed, this verse has always been the primary proof-text used against perpetual virginity, and already in the 4th century, the Church was responding to it. However, such a debate would detract from the point Matthew is making.

Here the evangelist affirms (a) that Mary was a virgin at the conception of Jesus (b) no man was involved in the conception, and (c) that she physically gave birth the Messiah. The miracle is not that Mary avoids birth, but that God enters flesh without ceasing to be God.

The perpetual virginity of Mary has always been upheld right up to this day in the Western and Orthodox Churches. Strong rejections focusing on the figure of Mary (rather than on the nature of the Incarnation) came in later to support wider rejection of Roman Catholicism from later Protestantism and as the fruit of biblical interpretations not grounded in the biblical learning of the past.

For example, even Martin Luther referred to Mary as “ever-Virgin” (*immer Jungfrau*). In a 1522 sermon, Luther says:

“Christ, our Saviour, was the real and natural fruit of Mary’s virginal womb... This was without the cooperation of a man, and she remained a virgin after that.”

The key word of contention is “until”, which the Fathers interpreted as a point of emphasis and **not** of later reversal. Classic examples used by the Fathers:

2 Samuel 6:23 – *“Michal had no child until the day of her death”*

Matthew 28:20 – *“I am with you until the end of the age”*

In neither case does “until” imply a change afterward.

Questions for this week:

- *Joseph is called “righteous” before he understands what God is doing.*
How do I respond when faithfulness requires trust rather than clarity?
- *Joseph chooses obedience without speaking a word.*
What would faithful action look like for me right now, even without complete certainty?
- *The name “Jesus” is given before the child can act or speak.*
How does this shape my understanding of salvation as gift rather than achievement?
- *This Gospel ends not with explanation, but with obedience.*
What invitation to trustful action might this Advent be placing before me?

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Notes by Father Diego Galanzino for *The Sunday Gospel* – A discipleship group of the Parish of All Saints' Houghton Regis, December 2025. allsaintshr.co.uk/learning