

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT – YEAR C



LOVE

On the last Sunday of Advent the fourth candle on the wreath is lit. In many Church traditions this candle represents love, when we ponder the self-giving love of Christ himself. (Many wreaths also include a fifth white 'Christ' candle in the middle, which will be lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day itself.)

First Reading Micah 5: 1–4

The prophet Micah, a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah, wrote at a time of great turmoil. The Assyrians had invaded the northern kingdom, Israel, and were besieging Jerusalem. The southern kingdom of Judah was threatened. Micah, speaking eight centuries before the birth of Jesus, admonishes the people for their sinful behaviour but promises that eventually a better time will come, when an idealised, perfect king will restore the glory of their region.

The king will come from Bethlehem – literally meaning 'house of bread' – in the region of Ephrathah, five miles south of Jerusalem (rather than the 'other' Bethlehem to the north west of Nazareth. This small village was the birthplace of Jesse and his son David, Israel's greatest king.



From this humble place will rise the perfect king of ancient lineage ('the days of old') born of 'she who is going to give birth'. He will reunite and rule his people as a shepherd guides his flock. This will be a time of peace.

Reading Matthew's Gospel (2: 5–6), we can see how the people interpreted this prophecy at the time of Jesus.

When Herod asks the Magi where the Messiah was to be born, they reply 'in Bethlehem of Judea' and quote the verses from Micah which we pray today. Thus it is clear that at the time when Matthew wrote his gospel, people saw in Jesus the long-awaited Messiah, the shepherd-king.



Gospel Luke 1: 39–44 The Visitation

Mary encounters the Angel Gabriel, who announces not only that she is to conceive and bear a son, but that her kinswoman Elizabeth is also expecting a child, despite her great age. Mary now sets off to meet Elizabeth.

Mary set out *at that time and went as quickly as she could*

St Luke does not give any reasons for Mary's journey. Was it because she wanted to congratulate her cousin; because she was afraid of the local social stigma of being pregnant before she was married; or perhaps because she was frightened and was seeking comfort from an old friend? Every reader will have their own answers.

Luke, however, gives us a sense of the immediacy of her decision.

A town in the hill country of Judah

Everything in Luke's account contributes to making this important encounter low key. No powerful local dignitaries are mentioned and the location is a nameless town in the countryside. In a reversal of the normal social order of the time, it is two pregnant women who occupy centre stage.

Elizabeth and Mary

There are many instances of older or barren women who conceive against all expectations in the Old Testament: Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel in Genesis, and Hannah in the first book of Samuel.

Mary, on the other hand, is a young girl; scholars think she was a young teenager, probably less than 15 years old.

Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit

In Luke's Gospel this expression carries the same meaning as in the Old Testament: the person is empowered by God to perform a special task.

A visit from the mother of my Lord

This is the first time Jesus is called 'Lord'. Before this, the term 'Lord' had been connected to God; but from now on 'the Lord' will refer to Jesus Christ. We are reminded of Thomas's cry in St John's Gospel 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20: 28).

Fulfilled promises

The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is the old order meeting the new one. Elizabeth is to give birth to John, a prophet in the Old Testament tradition, while Mary is to give birth to Jesus, God made man. Jesus is the fulfilment of all the promises made by God in the Old Testament.