

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

David

The word *David* has only three characters in Hebrew (the language has no written vowels). Yet for a Jew it is a powerful word: and it resounds through the Scripture of this last Sunday before Christmas. David too has his place in the Christmas story.

House of David

The House of David is the House God built, the royal dynasty; King Ahaz is called this ironically, because he was one of the least faithful of the kings in Jerusalem. Isaiah is reminding him of his vocation from God, who promised David that He would be a Father to each of his descendants. Ahaz had become lost in his fearful and irreligious politics, trying to ally with Gentiles to secure his nation, instead of trusting in God. He accepted Babylonian religion in an effort to impress the great empire to the north, and offered his own son as a sacrifice to the Assyrian god. This crime was formally sacrilegious, since *the son of the king* was God's promised heir to David. To kill him was to abandon the promises of God. But Isaiah's sign to Ahaz is that another royal child is on the way – that God hasn't abandoned Ahaz or his plans for David's throne. This heir will embody God's covenant as *Emmanuel - God-with-us*.

A Descendant of David

Paul speaks of Jesus as "according to the flesh, a descendant of David"; this ancestry was accorded to him by Joseph, himself "of the House of David". By accepting Jesus as his own son, Joseph gave him his place in the tribe of Judah. So when the angel appears to Joseph in his dreams, he finds himself addressed as "Joseph son of David" – although we've already been told Joseph's father was called Jacob. It's as a descendant of *David* that Joseph's role is vital for the life of Jesus who must receive the inheritance of the King whom God uniquely loved. This Joseph will give him: not because of the facts of "flesh and blood" (Joseph knows Jesus is not his son in those terms) but because of a spiritual fact, expressed in the revelatory dream and in Joseph's obedience to it.

Faith And Facts

In our religion there is a constant dialogue between the world of faith, instructed by the word of God, and the world of facts as human eyes perceive them. The truth is that, if human beings

are prepared to suspend judgment, "facts" are not always as tyrannical as we think. Even when they don't yield to the will of man, they can yield to the power of God. The biblical story is about the constant tendency of human beings to shut down their possibilities, and the unchanging offer of God to open them up again. When all seems lost in human terms, God asks only belief in order to redeem and refresh. King Ahaz had turned his face to the wall, and had sent his faith to the wall too. God insisted on preserving his future, despite his total unworthiness to be saved. Joseph thought all was lost when he discovered the dread fact of Mary's pregnancy; but even if it took a whole archangel to turn him round, God did not allow even the motives of "a man of honour" to prevail over the divine wisdom. When Paul assures us that God is calling us to the obedience of faith, therefore, we too may look for a trust in God which enables us to treat "facts" with a certain creative mistrust. Christmas speaks to us of unlikely and astonishing things: of an ordinary world which becomes suddenly eloquent, of a sky suddenly illuminated by a pointing star, or peopled with a chorus of the heavenly host: and amid the shepherds who desert their flocks to visit a new baby, perhaps we can discern the features of a little lad, a shepherd in the fields above Bethlehem, who was called down to Samuel, a thousand years before, to be anointed King of Israel, where he stood with his brothers.

Fr Philip