

Reading the signs: Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

by [James Alison](#) in the [December 11, 2007](#) issue

*“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel”* (Matthew 1:23).

We are on the very brink of the nativity. Our sense of the power of the One coming in has been stretched, challenged and recast over the past three weeks. Now the reality of that power begins to dawn more clearly, and what is astonishing about it is that, unlike any power we know, this power is confident enough to be vulnerable. And that means confident enough in us to be vulnerable to us.

King Ahaz did not have the confidence to be vulnerable. He needed the appearance of strength to help him out in his military difficulties. Isaiah challenges him to imagine what God might be like, what it would look like for this Other to put in an appearance. Ahaz can ask for the most outlandish sign from above or from below (the sign he asks for will reveal what sort of criterion Ahaz has for who God is). But the reality of what the Other might look like could be disconcerting to Ahaz with his political schemes. He doesn't really want a sign.

Isaiah gives him a sign anyhow, a sign that is unlike anything Ahaz could have imagined. There is nothing outlandish about this sign. It doesn't appear to come from heaven or to emerge from sheol. It is quiet, gentle, seemingly ordinary. At first glance a maiden is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Emmanuel. This sign would appear to be totally natural, totally from the human side of things, rather than from something special, divine and portentous, thus not really a sign at all. And yet in this gesture of quietude and confidence, God will reveal himself as the one who loves his people and brings his kingdom to flourishing. It is the sort of sign not perceived by those whose attention is fixed on current affairs, on power politics, on strategic calculations.

Matthew has seen this in his Gospel. He has seen that Isaiah's promise of a sign relating to a kingdom flows into the much fuller sign that is happening now, quietly and offstage. The fullness of the power that Isaiah pointed to was revealing itself in a gentleness made available under the most delicate of circumstances. The maiden

chosen to bear the son was not living in any well-protected enclave. On the contrary, the first thing that the power dared to do was to make itself visible as a provocation, inviting the maiden who was found to be with child to share the opprobrium of being a single mother in a society in which such things might easily lead to death. She was to depend for her reputation, and maybe for her life, on the good will of an untested male who knew that he was not the father of the child.

What sort of power is it that allows itself to be so vulnerable? It is prepared to trust itself to one of the most notoriously unreliable features of human existence—not only the pain and riskiness of human gestation and childbirth, but also the whole of human skittishness about male honor, and the potential for violence that goes with female dependency. Beyond this, as Matthew makes clear, this power is prepared to allow itself to be vulnerable to that most dangerous of constructs: the law. Joseph was a righteous man and knew well what Deuteronomy 22 prescribes for cases such as Mary's pregnancy: death by stoning. But Joseph's righteousness consisted in his being inclined to interpret that law in the most gentle way possible: his seeking to obey it by "putting her away quietly" was not an automatic or predictable response.

When Joseph decided to apply the law in this way, it was a fragile act of interpretation and one that would not be easy to carry out in practice, since "secrets will out." This decision was made just prior to the Lord's inviting Joseph to consider another possible interpretation: that Mary's pregnancy was not in any way something which fell foul of the law, but something that came from the Holy Spirit. Joseph had a dream, and in the light of that dream he was invited to make an interpretation with enormous practical consequences.

Again: how extraordinary is a power that is gentle and confident enough to enter into the practical consequences of a human act of interpretation? There is no sign that is not also a human act of interpretation, and there can be no riskier way than this to enter into the realm of signs. This pregnant woman is either an adulteress or a virgin blessed by God. What power is it that is prepared to trust that a human will choose the latter, infinitely less plausible interpretation, and then graciously cover over the vulnerability of his bride-to-be and allow the sign to flourish?

It is little wonder that in Galatians, Paul emphasizes that Jesus was born under the law, for Jesus' vulnerability to the law is the sign of the power of the One who was to fulfill the whole purpose of the law. This is all about power, as is made magnificently clear in the introduction to Romans. The fulfillment of all God's promises will come through someone who is of the now failed and insignificant line of David. This one

will be declared or ordained the high priest of God, God's son, Yahweh himself, bearing the name by his passing through death in the spirit of holiness. Vulnerability to mere flesh; vulnerability to the law; vulnerability to death: these will be the signs of the power of the One coming in, the signs of his confidence in us, in what we can become, and in what he can make of us.