

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 24, 2017

Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-11, 16; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

On this last Sunday before Christmas and the Mass readings speak about the preparations that God made for his Son to be born among us and as one of us. We wait for his coming into the world and into our lives. There is one thing God promised to each man and woman of his personal presence when he called them into his service. He never asked them to do anything for him without making this promise. It was to be their greatest source of strength and encouragement and confidence and he would never fail them. It was a simple promise but an unimaginably great one and with this he remains close us. With this closeness to human persons God does not change but he allows us to change and become one with him. In the first reading King David wishes to build a house for God better than his own. He seeks some way to give thanks to God for all the blessing he received from him. But God has not finished filling his life with blessings. In the second reading Paul speaks about the mystery of salvation about to be revealed and marvels at the divine plan and gives glory to God. In the Gospel we have the familiar passage of the Annunciation where the Angel tells her that she has found favor with God and announces the divine identity of the child whom Mary is about to conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the First Reading taken from the Second Book of Samuel, we hear of God bringing peace in the land when David was made king over the Jewish people. Through King David, God had delivered the nation from all its enemies. In appreciation for the greatness of the Lord God's victory over His enemies, king David went to the prophet Nathan, expressing his concern that while he was living in a beautiful wooden house of cedar, the Lord God dwelled in a tent. Now, a tent might have been suitable for God when His people were moving around because of persecution. But now that their home had been established and their victory had been secured, surely, God deserved something better than a tent. Hearing King David's desire for a dwelling place for God, the prophet Nathan told him that God was with him. As such, he should do whatever his heart calls him to do so God may have his rightful place among His people. But, God had other plans. That night, He spoke to Nathan, telling him to give a message to David to make of him a dwelling place worthy of him. David wanted a magnificent Temple for God where the Ark of the Covenant would be kept. Eventually a magnificent temple would be built, not by David but by his son Solomon and later even more magnificent one by Herod the Great. However, the house that David was being

asked to build was a different kind of house – it was the house of David, consisting of all his descendants and their subjects. “The Lord will make you a House. Your House and your sovereignty will always stand secure before me and your throne be stabled forever.” What God was implying was that no human being could build a house that could hold God. A house is not good enough and no one but God could build an eternal Kingdom.

In the Second Reading from the Letter to the Romans, Paul expressing his wonder at divine plan for us says that God is able to strengthen us in the Spirit of Truth. He reminds us that each one of them is now a temple of God, of the Spirit of Jesus. In the New Covenant there is no longer any temple building but as Paul says, we are God's temple, a place of worship of which each one is a constitutive part. Through his teaching God makes known to us His mysteries. God spiritually disposes the minds of the believers who hear the proclamation of Jesus, He Who revealed God's mystery that was kept secret for centuries and which has now been revealed. This knowledge and understanding of the Divine wisdom of God's mysteries through Christ was made known to all people of the world according to the Divine Will of God, to bring everyone in obedience to God through faith in Christ. For the eternal glory belongs to Jesus Christ. In other words, St. Paul was saying, listen to and obey the words of Jesus Christ. For through Jesus, the salvation of mankind has come to all, for God's plan includes all people, the Jewish nation and the Gentiles. Those who surrender in faith are saved. The Kingdom of God has come on earth as it is in Heaven. It is not a Kingdom that can be seen but rather a spiritual Kingdom. Through Jesus, you will find the complete fulfilment of God's promises to the prophets.

In the Gospel of today we have the Annunciation narrative. The first thing we notice here is that the initiative for the entire event comes from God. We are also given the clues that this is not going to be like anything traditionally associated with the coming of Messiah. The woman chosen for God's great work is a very young unsuspecting virgin who comes from a town not even mentioned in the Old Testament. Indeed that is the way God works. When Luke pictured God's announcement through the Archangel to Mary of the coming birth of Jesus, much of what he wrote had to do with the Prophecy. The Annunciation to Mary is a parallel to the earlier episode where the Archangel Gabriel announces to Zechariah the birth of John the Baptist. There is a similarity in structure: the announcement is made, the recipient is troubled by the message proclaimed, the recipient is told not to fear, and a sign is given confirming the announcement. In

both cases the Archangel points to a sign and then expands the meaning of it. The function of the explanation is to make clear that the child to be born to Mary is superior the child to be born to Elizabeth. John the Baptist is to be the precursor of the Messiah. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. When Luke describes message to Zechariah he gives many details, while in the annunciation to Mary we have only the time and place mentioned. The Angel comes to Zechariah it is within the gold-plated walls of the Temple at Jerusalem, but is in the humble dwelling of Nazareth six months later to bring the message to Mary. The angel comes to Zechariah when a large crowd is found but appears to Mary in private.

With Mary, the angel's greeting began by calling her God's favoured one. Honouring God with her whole being, Mary displayed what it meant for a human being to be full of grace. The angel's statement that the Lord was with Mary, when it comes from God, implies a special position of importance for her. Much more than God's presence with David, the Lord is literally with her. She is the New Ark, beyond all reasonable expectations. She was to be the first human being who could say of Jesus, "This is my body and this is my blood." It is no wonder then this simple girl was greatly troubled. Unlike Zechariah who was afraid of the sight of the angel, Mary was only troubled by his words. Gabriel understood her perplexity and spoke her name for reassurance. He then proceeded with the promise that Mary would conceive and bear a son. In the Jewish tradition this was a blessing from God. Yet Mary asks the question how it is possible because she was told that the child she would bear would be son of God and she had no relation with man. The angel's response is that all will be accomplished by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit that was present at the first creation manifested the glory of the Temple and signified the divine presence in the world will now bring the new creation in her. She understood it all and said yes to God and the miracle of God becoming human person took place there.

Luke no doubt intends to have the story of the annunciation to Mary to have an Christological meaning, indicating the centrality of Christ by giving his true identity as the Messiah and the Son of God. Mary has the new dignity that she is chosen to become the Mother of God. She responds by doing what she will be portrayed as doing at several other moments of her life, namely, she ponders. In pondering this strange announcement Mary realizes that humanly speaking it makes no sense. She has not been with a man. In pondering Mary also realizes that this is not about human possibility. It is about God and nothing is impossible

to God. In pondering Mary is also able to remain who she is and who she should be, a humble servant of the Lord. As servant Mary will do whatever is needed to fulfil her calling. She does not have to understand the announcement and she need not have any fear of anyone. After all, this not really about her and she knows it. It is about the Son she will bear and truly marvellous thing will take place because of him. In the meantime she will continue doing what she does best, remain pondering and contemplating. Yet she knows she is chosen for the task of redemption and says yes to God.

There are a further two themes here which interact with each other. On the one hand, all that happens to Mary comes with pure gratuitousness from the hands of God. Mary is described as "full of grace", filled with God's favour and graciousness, something which she has in no way earned. On the other hand, Mary exercises her inviolable right to freedom of choice. A request was made of her and she freely responds with a wholehearted 'Yes'. "I am the slave or the handmaid of the Lord; let what you have said be done to me." Mary is thus presented as the perfect disciple and, in Luke's gospel, is the forerunner of many other apparent nobodies – women, sinners, little people who were hardly to be thought of as likely candidates to respond positively to God's revelation in Jesus. Mary's 'Yes' changed the world. Her obedience to God's call changed the lives of all of us – believers or not – one way or another. Perhaps obedience is not popular today when people want to be independent. Obedience is understood surely wrongly, as passive subservience. The world associates obedience with weakness and spinelessness. True obedience comes from a free choice made in the light of what is true and good. True obedience requires a great deal of courage because it can involve going against the tide of social expectations. True obedience aims not at safely conforming to the expectations of those more powerful than ourselves but of putting oneself at the service of something that is greater than oneself. In the Gospel picture, the greatest are not those who have coercive domination over others but those who offer their personal resources to serve and build. True greatness, then, is positively to accept what God clearly wants us to do or what he wants to do through us.

At the moment when Mary said her yes and that God's will be fulfilled in her, great event that took place in history. The Son of God took human nature in the womb of the Blessed Virgin. This indeed is the tremendous description of the act of God's love for us. Mary's yes was the beginning of all and everything that would happen to her for the rest of her life. The favour of grace works in Mary

from the beginning. She does not restrict herself to purely personal attitudes. Mary understood as the Angel told her that there was more and much more at stake. The Angel had told her that it would be the saviour who would be in her womb. He would be the King but the nature of kingship was not clear to her. But she understood one thing clearly that the person whom she would carry in her womb would change the world. She knew this would be the new beginning for all and the end of the power of the world. Through her God would change the structure of the world. What she carried in her womb gave her a vision wide as the world and as lasting as the human history. Through her yes she not only opened herself to receive God into her life but she opened herself to the new vision. Mary gives us an example of how we should say yes to God's call in our lives.

As we prepare ourselves for the birth of our Saviour we must realize that God is at home with us and we are at home with him. He is the Word made flesh, and the one who pitched his tent among us, so that as God's children, we become members of the divine household. We look at Mary, the humble handmaid of the Lord. Although deeply troubled and wondering, Mary recognized that God's power could make virginity and barrenness compatible with childbearing. She said, therefore, "May it be done to me according to your word." Made confident by her humility and modesty, and prudent by her virginal simplicity, Mary gave the yes to accept the long and eagerly awaited messiah, the Son of God. Our Advent and Christmas wish is that, like Mary, we who make up the Church have such a humble, modest, confident, simple, prudent and obedient faith that we are given a home by God. And believing firmly that the greatness of the King, whose Second Coming we await in joyful hope, is very much compatible with the littleness of especially the least of his brothers and sisters, we may recognize him in them, in their hunger, in their loneliness, in their misfortune, and make a home for them, for him, and truly become the Church, the communion, of the Poor.

On this last Sunday before Christmas and the readings speak about the preparations that God made for Jesus to be born among us. We wait for his coming into the world and into our lives. As we continue to celebrate the Holy Mass, let us remember that Jesus is with us, here and now, having established His spiritual Kingdom at Bethlehem as he did on the Day of Pentecost. May we remember that by partaking in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist in the visible Body of Christ, we are participating in a great feast that is taking place in the invisible Kingdom of God on earth. It is by saying, with Jesus and Mary, a

wholehearted and totally unconditional 'Yes' to Jesus that he will be re-born in me or maybe even born in me for the first time. By my saying 'Yes', through me he will be born or re-born in others too. This Christmas, we need to be very clear about the fact that what we do to make it special is simply nothing compared with God's work in us. Christmas is his work, not ours. It is his coming, for our salvation.

There is an old fable in which the mighty oak tree which stood for over one hundred years finally was blown over by a storm. The tree fell into a river that floated it downstream until it came to rest among the reeds growing along the riverbank. The fallen giant asked the reeds in amazement, "How is it that you were able to weather the storm that was too powerful for me, an oak tree, to withstand?" The reeds replied, "All these years you stubbornly resisted the winds that swept your way. You took such pride in your strength that you refused to yield, even a little bit. We, on the other hand, have not resisted the winds, but have always bent with them. We recognized the superior power of the wind and so, the harder the wind blew the more we humbled ourselves before it." This simple story similarly says, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6)

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