

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 23, 2018

Micah 5:1-4; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-44

Today's Gospel tells us the touching story of Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth and the recognition of the baby Mary was carrying in her womb as the long awaited saviour. This visitation serves to bring together the two annunciation strands of Luke's infancy narrative. Here the two pregnant women of faith meet, even though Elizabeth is clearly subordinate to Mary. Both children in the womb will be great, but Mary's child will be the son of the Most High. With the greeting of Elizabeth, the child in her womb John leaps for joy. Elizabeth takes this opportunity to call Mary as the blessed one. What does it mean to be blessed in the context of Mary is the question we would always ask. For a secular person Mary may look so ordinary; but Mary's blessedness had to do with something much deeper, in the sense she had her heart open to God. This could be recognized only by a person of faith. The Bible uses the word blessed to mean happy. Happiness is the joy that comes with the contact with the divine and Mary had it in her life. Mary was blessed and happy because the promise of God was fulfilled in her. She was the one who believed that the saviour would come to the world through her and that is the happiness we celebrate at Christmas.

The readings of today take us closer to the Christmas celebration. There is the quietness and expectancy and we are awaiting the glorious event to take place immediately. Each of the three readings takes up a different aspect of this great mystery to help us in our understanding and in our personal preparation. We see the divine plan put into action in the selected persons to make us understand that nothing is impossible to God. This promise is magnificent and it is to come into existence in time. Even the ends of the earth will hear his wisdom and peace will prevail among the nations. His coming is already announced to the nations.

The First Reading, taken from the prophet Micah, sets out the promise of great things to come. It speaks of the obscure town of Bethlehem and not some other greater center of Israel. The prophet takes the listeners back to the ideal beginning of their kingdom when David of Bethlehem was anointed as King. God will bestow on it the distinction of being the birthplace of an ideal ruler of Israel. The one who will come from this town will be "the one who is to rule over Israel" and "his origin goes back to the distant past", indicates that this was preordained by God. However, only God knows when this ruler will come. Until such time as the Messiah arrives to deliver Israel from its oppressors, the Jewish

people will continue to be subject to other nations. When he does come he will be the true shepherd of Israel and the servant of God. He will guide people by the standards of heaven rather than by the misguided notions of the bad shepherds who preceded him. Very significantly, "he himself will be peace, shalom". Then, God's people shall be delivered and united as one. There is peace when there is total harmony among the nations and the ends of the earth will hear of his wisdom.

Our Second Reading for today tells us that Jesus appearing among us as a human person can only be fully understood in the light of his self-sacrifice and obedience. Jesus came into the world desiring nothing but to do the will of the Father. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that God is not really interested in sacrifices and oblations of animals and things. The reading tells us that God took no pleasure in holocausts or sacrifices for sin. Instead, the Father prepared a body for his Son. And, united with that body as a true human being, the Son offered himself unconditionally to his Father and chose to do his will. This self-offering far transcends any other offering that could be made. No one can offer more than one's own self. Such sacrifice surpasses all sacrifices of the old covenant and brings them to fulfilment. At the same time, giving himself to his Father, he joined us to himself so that we too may be consecrated to the Father. This offering of himself will be seen in the whole life of Jesus, leading finally to the dramatic confrontation on the cross where Jesus will make the final offering of himself with "the greatest love that a person can show" to say "Here I am! I am coming to obey your will." In giving himself to his father Jesus joined us to himself so that we also might be consecrated to the Father.

The Gospel of today tells us about the visit of the Virgin Mary to her cousin Elizabeth. This visit took place a short time after the Incarnation of the Word of God in Mary. Moreover, it was the Angel Gabriel who, in a way, invited Mary to go visit her cousin, who was already six months pregnant at the time. He told her that her kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren, for nothing is impossible to God. So Mary set off in haste to visit her cousin and Luke gives no motive for Mary going in haste to visit Elizabeth. Mary had just conceived, through the action of the Holy Spirit, a son: the very Son of God, Jesus. When she arrived at the home of her cousin Elizabeth, Mary was already in preparation for the coming of the Son of God into the world. She was aware of the task given to her by God and she now prepares for her mission, that of the Mother of God, that mission which consists in bringing into the world a

child who is God in person. For her this preparation will be a support and a consolation and fulfilment of the call.

The Gospel tells us that when Mary entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth, she was filled with the Holy Spirit and expressed words of greetings and praise. This visitation serves to bring together the two annunciation strands as written in Luke's infancy narrative. Though both women are with child, it is Mary who takes the initiative to visit Elizabeth. In a sense, that is right and proper because Mary is the younger of the two. On the other hand, we know that the status of Mary is higher because she bears within her the Son of God. In the coming of Jesus, even before his birth in Bethlehem we are presented with the humility of the mother and her Son. It is they who go to visit and not they who are visited. Even before he is born, Jesus already comes to serve and not to be served. It is through service the world will recognize him as Lord. While in the presence of Jesus, John the Baptist, the child in the womb, was also filled with the Holy Spirit and leaped for joy. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth will function as a prophetess who proclaims the greatness of Mary for being the mother of the Lord and for being faithful to the Word that Angel Gabriel communicated to her at the Annunciation.

In this visitation narrative, Luke has shown to us who Mary is in relationship to Elizabeth and who Jesus is in relationship to John the Baptist. Elizabeth and John the Baptist expressed their joy in the presence of the Lord. Here is the meeting of the two children too. Both children still in the womb will be great but Mary's son will be the Son of the Most High. As soon as Mary greets Elizabeth, divine activity takes place. The child in the womb of Elizabeth leaps in recognition of the child in Mary's womb. Even before birth it is clear that Jesus is the mightier one to come and John is the one to make this announcement. Second thing that happens is that when Mary greets Elizabeth, the latter is filled with the Holy Spirit. With the gift of the Holy Spirit Elizabeth will function as a prophetess who proclaims the greatness of Mary for being the Mother of the Lord and for being faithful to the words of the angel Gabriel told her at the annunciation. Therefore in this visitation event Luke has managed to show us who Mary is in relationship to Elizabeth and who Jesus is in relationship with John the Baptist. This is all due to the work of the Holy Spirit who is the divine agent making possible these marvelous events.

Again we notice the emphasis that is placed on Mary as a believer. One of the favourite themes of Luke that runs through the Gospel is the

fidelity or the faithfulness of God. God is one who keeps the promises no matter how difficult or complicated events may seem. Mary is portrayed as a pre-eminent believer, who believes that God's promises she received through the angel will be fulfilled. That does not mean Mary understood this fully at that time; it was revealed to her gradually and she understands this when her son is hanging on the cross to give his life for the world. What is important for us is that Mary was filled with grace from God and her faith made her to respond fully. This is implied in the response of Elizabeth to Mary's greeting. Hence she could easily say: "Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?" This by implication is the visit from the Lord himself. It is the response of Elizabeth in faith. She could indeed see God's working in her life. Elizabeth's entire discourse is a glorification of Mary. God takes pleasure in rewarding his faithful servants. Mary humbled herself in her obedience and in her faith in the Word of God: she is now glorified by her own relative Elizabeth! But the glory of Mary is not her own. No, it belongs to God himself! Mary is never honoured apart from Jesus Son of God: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth glorifies God for granting her the privilege of receiving the mother of Lord in her house. Mary is glorified because she is the Mother of God!

Mary herself has already followed her Son, though he is not yet born. Asked as an unmarried virgin if she is willing to be the mother of Jesus and assured that, with God, all things are possible, she has already said: "Yes! Let all this happen to me as you have planned it." At this stage, she had no idea what was in store but she said her Yes and promised to be faithful to it. This certainly reminds us that we too are the unlikely candidates for God's compassionate love. There is the providence of God which always works in our lives and certainly at the birth of the child at Christmas. We also will be blessed when we believe like Mary, that God's promises to us will be fulfilled. As we approach Christmas, let us draw strength from the most comforting of promises that God is Emmanuel, God with us. In all our ups and downs of our lives, God will be with us. Our awareness of this can be the source of the most profound happiness. Blessed are we who believe and live our days with this assurance. Although Mary's faith is without equal, one that is absolutely unique, it is nevertheless necessary for her to be comforted and supported by those close to her: for Mary is, above all, the model of the Church, the model that each and every believer must contemplate in order to try to imitate her. Now, although our faith is, unfortunately, not like that of Mary, we too need to be supported and comforted in our

mission as apostles of the Word of God. So we have a mission to carry out just like Mary in this world.

For Mary, this is an important stage. Before bringing her Son Jesus into the world, Mary receives from her own family a glorification without equal. Before the Son of God comes into the world for the first time, a named woman Mary, she whom God chose from all eternity to be the Mother of the Saviour, is glorified and praised for having served as an instrument of the very Word of God: "When the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy." This again was a moment of faith for Mary. There is the announcement that the Lord will be born in the world. The archangel Gabriel clearly announced this to Mary, and she, by the grace of God, believed this truth. There is not, and there will never again be, a great wonder, a deeper mystery than this! Elizabeth was able to express this Mystery thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit who was in her, but Elizabeth never truly understood what it was realizing. Only God, the Holy Spirit, as well as Mary understood this mystery. This is the Mystery we contemplate each year in the Nativity when Jesus comes into our lives and into our hearts.

In our everyday life, we rarely if ever see things like this. But the Lord gives us other signs now and then to make us aware of his presence in us and of his action, working through our poor attempts at faith in the mission he entrusted to us. He places on our path a certain person, such as a teacher or professor, a priest or nun, a friend or relative, who, at a particular moment, or over an extended period of time, brought us something that we can now see to have been very useful, or even indispensable, to our Christian life. The Holy Spirit who is in us through our baptism and our confirmation in the faith, and perhaps even through the sacrament of the diaconate or priesthood, will help us to see everything with the eyes of faith: for he is there to help us to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Let us prepare ourselves to receive this Lord at Christmas. We have who experienced the blessedness in her life, makes us also blessed in the Holy Spirit, helping us to receive the Lord in our life as she did.

A story is told about Beethoven, a man not known for social grace. Because of his deafness, he found conversation difficult and humiliating. When he heard of the death of a friend's son, Beethoven hurried to the house, overcome with grief. He had no words of comfort to offer. But he saw a piano in the room. For the next half-hour he played the piano, pouring out his emotions in the most eloquent way he could. When he

finished playing, he left. The friend later remarked that no one else's visit had meant so much.

"There was once a wise woman travelling in the mountains who found a precious stone in a stream. The next day she met another traveller who was hungry, and she opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveller saw the precious stone and asked if she might give it to him. She did so without hesitation. The traveller left, rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime, but a few days later he came back to return the stone to the woman who had given it to him. 'I've been thinking,' he said, 'I know how valuable the stone is, but I'm giving it back in the hope that you can give me something much more precious. I want you to give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me the stone.' The more you share of yourself, the more you grow.

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