

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

REFLECTION 1: BREAKING THE GOOD NEWS

A little girl sat on her grandfather's lap, looking into his face, she touched his wrinkled cheek. Then she touched her own smooth face and asked, 'Grandpa, did God make you?' 'Yes', he answered, 'God made me a long time ago'. Then she asked, 'Did God make me too?' Grandpa replied, 'Yes of course, chicken, but God made you just a little while ago'. Checking her own smooth face again, the little girl said, 'God's getting better at it, isn't he?'

In today's Gospel (Luke 1:26-38), Mary learns that she will give birth to the Son of God. She will soon be privileged to look upon her new born child and her lips to be the first to kiss the perfect face of God.

Mary must have been surprised by the message she received from the angel, she was to become a mother, but that seemed impossible, since she had chosen a life of virginity. Besides, even if that were so, why should she be singled out to be the mother of the long expected and eagerly awaited Messiah? Surely there were other more worthy women in Israel? No wonder Mary was disturbed.

How often it is like this for us when God intervenes in a human life when the unexpected and impossible happens? So often our first reaction is one of fear, fear that can grip and almost paralyse. What is needed is the kind, reassuring and healing word; 'Mary, do not be afraid; You have won God's favour' (v30). These are the words of divine love, so inspiring and liberating. Mary was courageous, brave, she spoke her 'fiat' – let it be done, without knowing precisely how this would come about. God's love can be demanding and yet warming and encouraging. The greater the demand, the greater the proof of God's love, 'You have won God's favour'.

This wonderful scene from the Evangelist Luke, reminds us of the words of Isaiah, 'Do not be afraid – I will save you. I have called you by name – you are mine. When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you. When you pass through fire, you will not be burnt; the hard trials that come will not hurt you. For I am the Lord your God, the holy God of Israel who saves you.' (Isaiah 43: 1-3).

Mary was content to ponder and to pray and as she gathered strength from these efforts, she was gifted with tremendous faith. By virtue of her faith, the Almighty took up residence in her and from that hallowed address, God has been uniquely made known in Jesus. This is the God who wishes to take up residence once more in each one of us this Christmas. 'Gura móide pobal Dé i bhfos, breith an tSlánathóra anallód'. May God's people on earth be enriched by the birth of the Saviour.

REFLECTION 2:

OUR SACRED SPACE

Many of us on our visits to Glendalough are reminded of the places associated with St. Kevin, St. Laurence O'Toole and the countless holy men and women who lived out their lives in the Glen of the Two Lakes. The first sacred spaces in the Bible were places where human beings experienced God, be it a mountain like Mt. Sinai or a river like the Nile, both associated with Moses. Gradually holy places became more permanently established as in the Tent of Meeting referred to in today's first reading (2 Sam. 7). Eventually the movable tent evolved into a stationary temple and was recognised as the holiest place for meeting and making contact with God. The final phase of this movement was the siting of the Arc of the Covenant as a permanent feature in the temple that Solomon built.

Now, with the coming of God in the person of Jesus Christ, holiness took up residence in a new location. Holiness itself had come to live within the human frame and so humanity itself became a holy space. This wonder is celebrated in today's Gospel as Luke relates the story of Jesus' conception (Luke 1:26-38). Through the power of the Most High, the very Spirit of God overshadowed Mary, as she became what the early church was proud to call 'The Ark of the Living Covenant' - a holy place, a sacred space in view of the child she conceived and carried. Mary welcomed the Spirit and brought forth Jesus, so becoming the holy space that God fully occupied. Mary became the place where others could come and encounter the God who lived within her. She continues to counsel us how to make room in our lives for the Living God, so transforming us to become beacons of light - living sanctuaries where God chooses to dwell in a darkened world.

We who await the Christ Child prepare symbols of welcome such as the crib. We are like those empty mangers awaiting the presence of God. Far be it from us that inn where there was no room and from which Mary and Joseph had been turned away, cluttered with the commercialism of Christmas. Advent reminds us to clear a space, to get rid of that clutter that crowds out our lives and create a welcome for God. Through our masses, our prayers, our hoping and yearning for the Holy One, we become that quiet pool of silence and welcome that only God can fill.