

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gospel: Luke 1:39-44

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

REFLECTION 1: ACTING ON THE WORD

Imagine yourself in the open doorway of an airplane, about to take your first parachute jump. Ten thousand feet below, a multicoloured postage stamp of farms and fields stretches across the rolling landscape. Your instructor's hand is resting on your shoulder and in a moment you know he will shout above the howling wind, 'Jump'. Part of your brain is screaming 'Don't jump. This is madness, you will die'.

When the angel Gabriel invited Mary to 'jump' into the unknown promise from God, Mary made her leap of faith, 'My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit finds joy in God my Saviour, for he has looked upon his servant in her lowliness; all ages to come shall call me blessed'. Here we have two women, two powerful women of faith and as they meet they sense a remarkable dream - wonderful life takes shape in the darkness, in the security of their wombs. Elizabeth's child leaping in recognition of Mary's child - here God's dream is taking flesh, real flesh! Remember the chorus in the Messiah from the prophet Isaiah, 'And the Glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken - All flesh shall see the Lord's glory'. It is remarkable how we seem to have lost sight of the ability that our faith is a flesh and blood thing. We have tended to downplay the body and relegate it to the sinful and evil, narrowing religion into rules and regulations.

In Mary's visitation to Elizabeth, 'Life' overtakes human hope. Mary's son, 'he whose origin goes back to the distant past, to the days of old (Mica 5:2) will incarnate the invisible godhead within human existence. Elizabeth's child (John the Baptist) will lead Israel's yearnings to their highest degree of expectancy. The life of God and the hope of humanity have met. 'Blessed is the one who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled'. Elizabeth's cry refers to the annunciation, when Mary overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, becomes the Mother of God. The visitation bears witness to the power of the Spirit that dominates the infancy narrative. Mary eagerly embarks upon her first apostolic journey to share her joy with her cousin. Elizabeth then proclaims her blessed among all women. John leaps with joy and so begins his mission as the forerunner, the herald, and the precursor. From the moment of Jesus' conception, a river of life continues to flow and it will soon water the face of the earth.

We breathe the same gospel fragrance today wherever Christians, following the example of Mary and Elizabeth tell each other how God is present in their lives when they celebrate with thanksgiving the marvels that the Lord has worked for them. Each time it is truly the church, the community of Jesus Christ that is born among us in the joyful stirring of the Holy Spirit. We sense deeply the presence of the one who became flesh. Advent is a time of growing faith and preparedness for the one who has come and will come again.

REFLECTION 2: FULL OF GRACE

A Jewish proverb says, 'God could not be everywhere, therefore he made mothers'. Even while Jesus was still in Mary's womb he brought joy to Elizabeth and her unborn child, John (the Baptist). Mary the mother to be became blessed for having trusted that God's word, through the Angel Gabriel, would be

fulfilled. At Jesus' birth, when the umbilical cord was cut, the bond between Mary and Jesus was never really broken. Mary remained faithfully at his side through all the events of his life and at the foot of the cross when it seemed that even the Father had abandoned him. Mary also remains with us throughout the centuries.

Today's Gospel narrative tells the story of two mothers to be and their encounter. Mary, after the visit of the Angel Gabriel, cannot sit still. Unlike Zachary, she didn't ask Gabriel for a sign, but she pointed out that her virginity might be an impediment to the pregnancy the angel announced. In response, Gabriel reminded her that nothing was impossible to God. Then, giving her a sign that she hadn't requested, Gabriel announced that God was already creating something new in the pregnancy of the aged Elizabeth. This spurred Mary to visit her cousin at Aim Karim, seventy miles away, to witness and confirm the incredible events that were unfolding. Luke tells us that at the very moment Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, 'the infant leaped/danced in her womb. John, even before he was born, was drawing attention to the good news of Christ's coming, so he 'danced'! 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb', Elizabeth proclaimed. God was visiting his people through Mary's consent.

As the days wind down towards Christmas, the Church's liturgy schedules a series of seven songs known as the 'O' Antiphons, as each begins with a joyful 'O'. They are welcome signs addressed to the Messiah prefaced by a title taken from the Bible, each beginning with the invitation, 'Come!' They remind us that the most important gifts of this season are the ones that God alone can give. For instance, take today's - 'O Wisdom, O Holy word of God.... come and show your people the way to salvation'. Then in the following days - 'O Wisdom, O Holy word of God....come and show your people the way to salvation....Come with outstretched arms to save us....Come without delay, lead your captive people from darkness into freedom....shine on those who dwell in the shadow of death....save all whom you have fashioned...O Emmanuel, come and set us free!' These 'O' antiphons have been interpreted as the response of Jesus to the faithful ones (anawim), who daily call out to him and Jesus answers 'Tomorrow I'll be there!' With these assurances, we believers can eagerly count down the days to Christmas. We can rejoice with the prophet Micah (first reading) in the knowledge that the Messiah who was born in Bethlehem will always be there to shepherd his people. We can give thanks with the author of Hebrews (second reading) that he has come to establish a new covenant in his own blood and through this shedding, we are sanctified. The Lord has indeed visited his people.