

4th Sunday of Advent

The Colour of Justice



In the beginning.....

Advent is a season of hope, and today's celebration points to the ongoing fulfilment of that hope as we are constantly surprised by the ways in which God acts.

Mary is Jewish, a young woman, pregnant, unmarried and poor. Yet of her it is said "blessed are you among women". Because she received the word of God in a spirit of openness and obedience, God could do great things in her.

In this 4th Sunday of Advent ponder the readings from :

1. Samuel 7:1-5. 8-12. 14. 16
2. Paul to the Romans 16:25-27
3. Luke 1:26-38

Mary was no empty vessel: 'deeply disturbed'....'asked herself what this greeting could mean'... 'how can this come about? She freely accepted God's gift: 'let what you have said be done to me'.

Now.....

What is God saying to us today about the role of women in the Church?

What is stopping us from saying: 'let what you have said be done'?

Do the women in your parish have prominent roles. How does the parish nurture them?

Is there anything you can do to bring this about?

And for you....

Read the article "Mary, as Model of Faith". Ponder the second last paragraph – what meaning has it for you? Can you set aside time (5 or 10 mins) this week – possibly the busiest in the year – to be in prayer with Mary as she awaits the birth of her Son, and Emmanuel our risen Saviour.

Catherine's Word on Mary:

"We ought to reflect on the manner in which the Blessed Virgin practised the different virtues... thinking how she replied to the Angel when he announced the mystery of the Incarnation. She says no unnecessary word, asks no useless questions".

Mary, As Model of Faith

2003-12-07

"Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" Picture the scene: Jesus has just impressed a crowd and a woman, probably a mother, shouts out: "You must of had a wonderful mother!"

Jesus responds something to this effect: "Yes, I had a wonderful mother, though in ways you don't imagine. She was wonderful not because she gave me biological birth, all mothers do that. What made her a great mother is that she gave me birth in the faith."

Here, as in others places, we have to be careful to understand what Jesus is really telling us about his mother. We see places in the gospels where he seemingly does not speak highly of her when in fact the reverse is true. For example, the instance when he is approached and told: "Your mother is here, trying to see you," and he answers, "Who is my mother?" Then, pointing to the people sitting around him, he says, "Those who hear the word of God and keep it are mother and brother and sister to me."

Is Jesus distancing himself from his mother here? No. He's pointing out the real link between them, namely, among all the people in the gospels, Mary is the pre-eminent example of the one who hears the word of God and keeps it. For this reason, more than because of biological motherhood, Jesus claims her as his mother. Giving birth to Christ is something more than biological.

Moreover, it's also something we're asked to do. How?

Looking at how Mary gave birth to Christ, we see that it's not something that's done in an instant. Faith, like biology, also relies on a process that has a number of distinct, organic moments. What are these moments? What is the process by which we give birth to faith in the world?

First, like Mary, we need to get pregnant by the Holy Spirit. We need to let the word take such root in us that it begins to become part of our actual flesh.

Then, like any woman who's pregnant, we have to lovingly gestate, nurture, and protect what is growing inside us until it's sufficiently strong so that it can live on its own, outside us. This process, gestation, as we know, is often accompanied by nausea, morning sickness, and a stretching of the flesh that permanently scars the body.

Eventually, of course, we must give birth. What we have nurtured and grown inside of us must, when it is ready, be given birth outside. This will always be excruciatingly painful. There is no painless way to give birth.

Birth, however, is only the beginnings of motherhood. Mary gave birth to a baby, but she had to spend years nurturing, coaxing, and cajoling that infant into adulthood. The infant in the crib at Bethlehem is not yet the Christ who preaches, heals, and dies for us. Every mother needs to give birth twice, once biologically and once in faith, once to an infant and once to an adult.

Finally, motherhood has still one more phase. As her child grows, matures, and takes on a personality and destiny of its own, the mother, at a point, must ponder (as Mary did). She must let herself be painfully stretched in understanding, in not knowing, in carrying tension, in letting go. She must set free to be itself something that was once so fiercely hers. The pains of childbirth are often gentle compared to this second wrenching.

All of this is what Mary went through to give Christ to the world: Pregnancy by the Holy Spirit; gestation of that into a child inside of her; excruciating pain in birthing that to the outside; nurturing that new life into adulthood; and pondering, painfully letting go so that this new life can be its own, not hers. When the woman in the crowd told Jesus, "You must of had a wonderful mother!", his answer had precisely this in mind. Mary was a wonderful mother, but in ways that went far beyond the simple fact of motherhood. She heard the word of God and kept it. That obedience, more than biological motherhood, gave both an infant Jesus and an adult Christ to the world.

And in this, Mary wants imitation, not admiration: Our task too is to give birth to Christ. Mary is the paradigm for doing that. From her we get the pattern: Let the word of God take root and make you pregnant; gestate that by giving it the nourishing sustenance of your own life; submit to the pain that is demanded for it to be born to the outside; then spend years coaxing it from infancy to adulthood; and finally, during and after all of this, do some pondering, accept the pain of not understanding and of letting go.

Christmas isn't automatic, it can't be taken for granted. It began with Mary, but each of us is asked to make our own contribution to giving flesh to faith in the world.