

## **The Fourth Sunday of Advent-- Dec. 19-20, 2020**

Next weekend we will remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem. The readings this week, though they may not seem like it, are actually quite theological in the sense that they prepare us to understand the deeper meaning of the birth of Christ.

For example, Luke tells us in the Gospel that Mary is a virgin even before he tells us her name. Why? Because Mary will conceive the child Jesus in a miraculous way through the power of the Holy Spirit. He also tells her child will rule as a king, but as more than an ordinary king. This king, the messiah, or anointed one, will be a king over a kingdom that would never end. On top of that, because he will be conceived by God's own Spirit, he would be called the "Son of God."

This is an awesome mystery-- that God took on our human flesh and became like us in every way except sin. The theological term for this mystery is the Incarnation of God. Sometimes people like to say Jesus was a great prophet or a great teacher, but that's all he was. The gospels tell us he is the Son of God. If he was less than that, there is nothing great about him because then he was a man full of delusions about himself. There is no in-between position that we can take on Jesus.

And how we live out our faith really depends on how firmly we believe in this wonderful mystery. If we truly believe that God has come into our world and into our lives through Jesus, shouldn't we try to spend time with him, shouldn't we try to get to know him better and follow him as well as possible? If we are not ready to do that, it might be asked how much there is to our faith. That is why today's readings are a very important help in preparing us for the celebration of Christmas. Seeing in today's readings the love and respect by which God enters into and interacts with our humanity can help us see and believe how he is truly with us and continues to work through us. St. Paul in the second reading talks about how God's actions were a mystery for long ages but are now fully revealed to us in the person of Jesus.

One of the things we learn from the Bible is that God enters into human history in very specific and concrete

ways. The creation of the world, we discover, is the last independent act of God. Once in relationship with the world, God relies on human partnerships to achieve his divine ends. Whether it is Noah or Abraham or the prophets or Elizabeth or Mary, God doesn't make a move in this world without a partnership in his saving works. King David in today's first reading is one such story of partnership with God. God chose to partner with Israel, but not just the tribes of Israel in general. It will be through the house of David in particular. David and all his descendant are taken up into God's plan. In the long genealogy that begins his gospel, Matthew tells us that God continues to look for partners in generation after generation. Who in our generation do we see partnering with God to achieve his holy ends?

It is amazing to see how deeply specific God is in his actions among us. For example, in today's Gospel God sends an angel, but not just any angel – Gabriel. God sends him to Galilee, but not to just any town – Nazareth. Gabriel is sent to a virgin, but not just any young girl – to Mary, who is betrothed to a man, Joseph, who is of the house of David.

God doesn't just wave a wand over the world to change the course of history. Some of us keep waiting for that, and some of us may be praying for that. But that's not how it works. God's actions and movements are achieved through partnerships with specific persons.

Is there something you really want to have happen? Don't pray for God to do it. Pray that God might use you to achieve some holy purpose in this world. It's okay to still pray simply – HELP once in a while. But try the idea of being God's partner in accomplishing what you are hoping for.

In previous Sundays this Advent, the focus was on John the Baptist. Today it is on Mary, who is offered to us as an example of waiting for Christ in order that we might concretely welcome him into our lives and our flesh. With her "yes" Mary conceived Jesus in her womb. With our "yes," we conceive Him in our hearts.

God, who is always "yes" for us had already begun his actions in the person of Elizabeth who was six months

pregnant, He had made his promise and he could fulfill it immediately, but he waits for Mary to say her “yes, let it be done to me as you have said.” When she does, the conception takes place. When we also say “yes” as Mary did, then conception takes place also in our hearts.

Also in regard to the time and place of our response to God, specificity and concreteness remain the issue. We should not wait for tomorrow to say “yes.” Normally we think of waiting for a better time in the future. However, the only time we have is the present. The past is gone; the future is not yet here. God is present in this moment and his proposal is being made to us now.”

Likewise in terms of the place. The announcement of the birth of the Messiah is made to Mary, a young woman who lives in Nazareth, a small, insignificant country village. Nazareth for us today means the place of our everyday life. It teaches us that the Word of God is in place where we live every day. It is in our daily lives that we can and must live as children of God and listen for the Word of God.

It may be helpful at times to go to shrines and holy places for spiritual events, but the important thing is the here and now – the time and place of everyday life. It is there that every day the Word of God is made flesh just as it happened in the everyday life of Mary. This new life began not in the temple but in simple humanity of Jesus who became the new temple and place of encounter with God.

One spiritual writer points out the poverty and humility of God in all this. One would expect that the visible manifestation of God would be something glorious, yet on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent the Church focuses our attention on the poverty of God who in self-emptying love becomes flesh in the womb of the virgin Mary.

King David wanted to build a beautiful temple for God, but God stops him and reminds him that he is not the grand caretaker of God’s power. God chooses to reveal his power not in beautiful temples of stone but in great acts of love for his people. His son, Solomon, does get to build the temple, but actually it is in the encounter between the angel Gabriel and Mary that the true house of

God is built. It is in Jesus, though hidden in the womb of Mary, that the true temple that David was waiting for comes into existence. In these closing days of Advent let us learn from God's correction of David. In this very different Christmas celebrated in this Covid pandemic, the power of God is not made manifest only through huge family gatherings and elaborate Masses. Our God, whom we dare to worship in the person of Jesus, chose to manifest himself in the womb of a virgin, hidden from the sight of the world. And this God, the Word made flesh, still chooses to dwell in the most humble of ways among us. In this rather unspectacular and much less festive Christmas, our God, in the poverty of his self-emptying love, is still there for us to see, and looks for us to partner with him in all that he is waiting to do in our world today.