

Homily for The Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year A)(22/12/19)

Each year the Fourth Sunday of Advent takes us into the presence of Mary, to wait with her for the birth of her Son. This year is no different, but the Gospel story that we hear today is about Mary as the wife of Joseph, and it introduces us to the righteous man who has been chosen to be the protector, defender, educator and guardian of the child who will save. So today we wait with Mary and with Joseph for this mysterious birth, that will turn not just their lives, but the whole world, on its head.

The Gospel that we have heard today is a sort of matching pair to the story of the Annunciation. That story is so familiar to us: it tells us about the visit of Gabriel to Mary, to announce to her the Good News that she is to be the mother of God's Son. Today's story is similar, as it involves a visit by an angel who comes to tell Joseph what is really going on. He comes to lay Joseph's fears to rest, to awaken in him a holy wonder at God's action, and to invite him to throw himself heart and soul into the story of God's daring and outrageous intervention in our world.

In both stories, the angels say 'Do not be afraid'. This angelic greeting occurs again and again in the scriptures. The Angel is a heavenly being, and the angel's home is in Heaven. Heaven is the place where all is well, where all at last makes sense and everything falls into place, so there is no place for fear there. When the angel comes to visit the human, he comes as one who is a little bit of Heaven, as one from the place without fear, and he brings with him the gift of experiencing for a moment the joy of Heaven. The angel doesn't say 'Do not be afraid' in the way that you or I might say 'Don't worry' – our words are comforting, but not themselves able to banish worry. When the angel says 'Do not be afraid', fear does indeed vanish, because the one who hears those words experiences the absence of fear that is the hallmark of Heaven. For Joseph in his dream, as for Mary at the Annunciation, just for these few moments the magnitude of the task ahead fades away, and all fear is banished. This experience of the heavenly fearlessness will be a great source of comfort and of strength through what lies ahead.

Once the angel has set Joseph free from fear, for the moment at least, he gives him a unique message. Here is something that Joseph hears which Mary didn't. There is a very particular message, which is just for Joseph. Gabriel said to Mary:

'You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High...'

To Joseph, however, the message is:

'She will give birth to a Son and you must name Him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.'

Both Mary and Joseph are told that the child is to be called Jesus, a Hebrew name that means 'God saves'. But only Joseph is told why. The child is to be called 'God saves' because he is the one to save his people from their sins.

None of this seems very strange or new to us; it is very familiar. But once again we need to try and read this passage as if we were hearing it for the first time. Jesus is indeed the Messiah, he is the Saviour, but look at what he has come to save people from. He is not coming to save them from the Romans, because the Romans need saving too; he is not coming to save them from the Greeks, because the Greeks need saving too; he is not coming to save them from the Egyptians, or the Babylonians, or the Assyrians, or any of the other nations that have threatened or attacked Israel over the course of history, because they all need saving too. He is not coming to save his people from any of them; he is coming to save his people, and all people, from themselves. The real damage is not done by the political manoeuvrings of exterior forces; the real damage is done by our own tendency to make ourselves into Gods. This message which Joseph receives is as new, as shocking and as unexpected as everything else that he hears. This child will be born in order to save people from their sins: that is, to save people from themselves.

So as we enter the last few days of Advent, a time which is full of frantic activity in material things, we are invited by the Church to pause for a little while and wait with Mary and with Joseph for the one who will save us from ourselves. We do need this salvation. On our own we cannot defeat the demons of egotism, selfishness, anger, despair, greed, pride and all the other forces that combine to propel us to make gods of created things, or to make gods of ourselves. It required a certain humility for Mary to accept the message of the angel; it required humility for Joseph to accept that married life was, for him, going to be very different from what he had thought and planned; it requires some humility for us to accept that we are not able to construct a perfect world, or indeed even a perfect life, on our own. Sandwiched between the humility of Mary the expectant mother, and the humility of Joseph, the chosen protector, we need to make space for our own humility. As we wait for Christmas we need to acknowledge that there is nothing to fear, because the angel has told us this, but all the same we do need a Saviour. We need someone to save us from ourselves, and only Jesus can do that. As we set off for the Christmas Masses in a few days time, this is what we need to have in our minds: 'Come to me and save me, because alone I am making a hash of it; come and save me from all the things that tempt me to self-destruction, but above all, come Lord, come and save me from myself.