

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C

The gospel invites us to spend this last Sunday of Advent with Mary. As we come to the final days of waiting and preparing for the coming of Jesus again into our homes and into our world, who better to spend it with than his mother who was in the final week of her pregnancy, preparing in silent contemplation to give birth to the child in her womb.

Through the consecration of baptism and the intimacy of holy communion we have Christ living within us too. God wants us also to reveal the mystery of this sacred life hidden within us. We are called to bear fruit for God. Who better to introduce us into the secrets of contemplative wonder and gratitude before the mystery unfolding in our lives than she who carried within her the incarnation of God. She knew that he was relying on her life-blood to nurture him within the temple of her womb. She can teach us that God is relying, too, on our cooperation with grace to do through us the wonderful things that he wants us to offer to the world.

We are accustomed to contemplating her at Cana as her heart goes out to the people who long, seemingly in vain, to quench their thirst with the best wine, the wine of God's Spirit pouring from the heart of God's Son. It is Mary who senses their need and who invites her Son to respond. It is time for his ministry of love to begin.

We are accustomed to contemplating her standing in grief at the foot of his cross, saying Yes to the awful wrenching as her Son is taken from her in death.

We are accustomed to contemplating her gathering his disciples together as they await his coming to them through the gift of his Spirit.

But today we are invited to go right back to the time before his birth and to watch her in prayer, drawn in spirit to the life within her.

She is the first temple of the new covenant and today she begs each of us not to allow ourselves to be so distracted in extroversion that we neglect to tend the sanctuary lamp of our heart as we, too, sense his presence in our soul and await the moment in which the one who is within us will allow his beauty to radiate out from us in that special loving which is the grace of Christmas. God's grace led Mary to the crib and the cradle. It will lead us, too, to the crib and cradle of our own family and our own home. The Spirit of God led her, as we learn in today's gospel, to the Judean hills on an errand of mercy. He will lead us on a similar errand.

We associate Mary with the great basilicas, the jewelled shrines and cathedrals of earlier ages. We also associate her with our own local church. Sometimes we see her holding her Son in warm embrace revealing his sacred heart. Sometimes we see her standing beneath the cross, and we see his heart pierced but exalted in God's glory and displayed for us to receive the compassion of his heart into our own and to go forth and carry on his mission of love among the poor, the outcasts, the paralysed and imprisoned of our own broken world.

Past ages thought that they were honouring Mary to speak of her as a queen. When we think, as we should, in terms of the kingdom of God as being the reign of God's love, it is appropriate to speak of her as queen who nurtured Jesus and nurtured the early community in love. In 1974,

Pope Paul VI in his encyclical on devotion to Mary encouraged us to think of her in terms more accurate to her real life and more relevant to the concerns of today's world. The real Mary gives us hope in our real and ordinary lives for she directs our attention to God's love and inspires us to respond to that love in faith, whatever our circumstances.

A story is told of a Polish soldier in a Russian concentration camp in World War II. He found an ox-bone in the soup and carved from it a statue of Mary. He knew that she was there with him in the horror and the pain. James Galvin, an American priest, composed a poem based on this story:

'Once they minted our Lady in multiple golden medallions,
Commingling her glories in smouldering roses of glass;
From gale-bellied mainsails she nodded on numberless galleons
Accorded a salvo at sunset on cannon of brass.

But now, though the pitiless shock of artillery shake her
From lily-sprung pinnacles high on the spires of Cologne,
Neither flogging nor hunger nor death can make captives forsake her:
From castaway ox-bone they carve her more splendid than stone'.

Mary reminds us at this time to find the heart of God in the most simple ordinary things - what more ordinary than a mother awaiting the birth of her child? When God came to us in Jesus, he came in the gentlest, humblest and most irresistible way - who can resist an infant? The rays of love pouring out upon our district from the heart of the exalted Christ are the same rays that come through the cry and smile of a tiny baby warmed by the straw and the breath of animals in a stable.

There was no room for him in the inn. There is little room for him in our department stores or in any arena of our public life in this materially prosperous and divinely graced, but largely antiseptic and irreligious, land. Let us ask her to help us make room for him in our hearts and in our homes, and help us to take him with us on every journey we take in this Christmas season.

She 'believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled'(today's gospel, Luke 1:45). In today's responsorial psalm we pray: 'Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved'(Psalm 80:3,17,19). God's promise to each of us is to show us the face of his Son, smiling upon us in love from the manger and reaching out for us to press him close to our breast and to take him to others. It is for us to believe this.

Let us pray together:

'Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, let us live like you in the love of your Son,
so that the reign of his love will come.

Lead everyone to the source of living water that flows from his heart.

May the world experience a renewal of hope and salvation, justice and peace
when he comes to us this Christmas.

Placing our trust in your love, we ask you to heed our prayer
and always to be a mother to us. Amen'.