

Homily: Fourth Sunday of Advent 2021 (Year C)

For this final Sunday of Advent, we're given a beautiful and very simple scene. Two women, cousins, meeting at a moment of great expectation in their lives. And two children, yet unborn; one, who will announce the coming of the Messiah, and the other, who will bring salvation to the world. In the first chapter of his Gospel, St Luke weaves together the stories of these two infants, the stories of Mary and Elizabeth. And in this scene, the Visitation, they meet. Of the four characters present in today's Gospel, it seems to me that Elizabeth is the one we consider least; so perhaps today we have an opportunity to view these events through her eyes.

Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron, the first Hebrew High Priest, and she herself was married to a priest, Zechariah. They both lived a good and holy life, observing all of the Lord's commandments and following His ways. But they were now getting old and had never been blessed with children: Elizabeth was considered 'barren'. This was a great suffering to her, both because of her desire to have children and because, at the time, it was considered a sign that God did not bless them. Elizabeth herself speaks of her 'humiliation' at being childless. Zechariah used to go and take his turn ministering in the Temple in Jerusalem, a few miles from their home. On one occasion, Zechariah returned from his service unable to speak. We do not know whether or not he was able to communicate to Elizabeth in some other way what had happened to him, but readers of the Gospel discover that he had seen the Angel Gabriel, who had promised him that his wife would bear a son, who would prophesy, would announce the coming of the Messiah, and even from his mother's womb would be filled with the Holy Spirit. As Zechariah did not believe the message, he lost his power of speech as a sign, until the time the child was born. As promised, Elizabeth conceived a child, and for five months she "kept to herself", nurturing this new precious life within her in the seclusion of her home.

Then, in the sixth month, quite unexpectedly, Mary arrives. And we now find ourselves at the scene we hear of today. Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting and at once feels the child leap with joy in her womb. Imagine this experience, if you can: for many years, she has longed for a child. Surely every movement, every kick, every sign of that life within her must have brought her enormous joy. Again she is reminded of this precious gift. But this is no ordinary movement of an unborn child: she describes it as a leap of joy. Her unborn child rejoices, and she is filled with joy both because of her own baby and because of the visit of her pregnant cousin, the Mother of her Lord. Mary is in the very early days of her pregnancy; Elizabeth could not possibly know, other than by the work of the Holy Spirit and the leap of her child, that Mary was pregnant, let alone that her unborn Saviour has entered her home.

Elizabeth's child, John the Baptist, is already a prophet. Later he will be a voice that cries in the barren landscape of the Judean wilderness. But even now, before he receives his voice, he announces the presence of Christ whilst still in his mother's womb, itself once considered 'barren'. He is filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth's husband is still unable to speak, but her unborn child has an eloquence beyond words. In this scene we see a strong

visual confirmation of the Church's absolute conviction that life begins at conception and that every life is of infinite value from its very beginning. Life in the womb is precious; it is holy.

Elizabeth herself recognises this: "Of all women you are the most blessed," she says, "and blessed is the fruit of your womb"; or, to use a translation which is more familiar to us, "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus." This is very powerful: at this moment in her life, she must feel herself so incredibly blessed by God; but yet more blessed is Mary, who carries the Saviour. "Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?" Elizabeth asks. Later, the elderly and faithful pair Simeon and Anna will rejoice to see the infant Lord in the Temple. Now, Elizabeth, herself faithful and advanced in years, does not see Him, yet she still finds abundant joy simply in His presence.

Elizabeth's story is one of hope fulfilled, of blessings received – it is a story of gift. The very name of her son, John, means "the Lord is gracious". The Lord has indeed been gracious to her. She waited and saw her hope fulfilled. She understands the meaning of waiting, expectation, hope and joy; she is a woman of Advent.

This scene is one of the most joyful anywhere in Scripture. What is the cause of all this joy? Quite simply, the presence of Jesus. A tiny presence; a hidden presence; a presence full of promise. A presence that cannot be seen, but can only be known by faith. A presence that is real for us, too. In a few days' time, we will celebrate the great feast of Our Lord's birth, the day when He became visible to our world. One day we too shall see Him with our own eyes. But as we await that day, and as we await the great feast of His birth, let's follow the example of Elizabeth, and allow ourselves to find deep joy in the hidden, gentle, silent but very real presence of our Saviour.

Fr Andrew

