

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year C)

The Church invites us to spend this fourth Sunday of Advent waiting with Mary for the birth of her child. This is a wonderful gift, because right at the time when most of us feel a great weight of things still to be done, preparations still to be made, food and gifts to be bought and so on, we are gently summoned to stop and be still for a while with the mother of the Lord. Surely we cannot miss the irony of the fact that just as we are rushing about the one person who plays a key role in the Christmas story seems remarkably tranquil. Mary has an extraordinary instinct for knowing how to act, for showing us the way to authentic human living, the sort of life that brings serenity and joy. It could quite easily not be so; she has received earth-shattering news, her whole world has been turned upside down and all of the normal expectations of a young girl have disappeared in an instant. But in spite of all this she knows just what to do. She is the great teacher of simplicity, the great teacher of how to cut through the panic, and the anxiety, and the business and the pressure. So let us turn to Mary this weekend, and see what she might have to teach us.

As soon as the angel leaves her after telling her that she is to be the mother of the Lord, Mary sets out to be with Elizabeth. She knew that Elizabeth was also expecting a child, because the angel had told her this, and now Mary hurries off to see her. This is very different from our hurrying: we are hurrying to the shops, while Mary is hurrying to her cousin so that they can share with one another their good news. We are hurrying to buy things, while Mary is hurrying to be with someone. I suppose it is possible that Mary took with her gifts for her cousin, but if she did so nobody has thought this important enough to record it. Mary brought companionship for Elizabeth, someone with whom to share these strange and confusing times, these mysterious events that would lead to the birth of a child; more important than this, however, Mary brought Jesus into the house of Elizabeth. Mary, who is carrying the Lord, spends three months with Elizabeth, and so for three months the Lord is resting in Elizabeth's home. She cannot see him, she cannot hear him, but he is there, and over those months Elizabeth will begin to see in Mary the changes that pregnancy brings. We have absolutely no idea what the two women did during this time, but it was a simpler, slower world than ours, with no long distance communication, no easy

travel, no complex technology, so we can quite properly assume that they simply got on with daily life: that, together, Mary and Elizabeth ran the household and did all the normal practical things of everyday existence. What a great privilege for Elizabeth! She immediately saw what a wonderful thing this would be the moment Mary arrived ‘Of all women you are the most blessed... why should I be honoured..’ For three months it is Elizabeth’s fire that warms the young mother of Jesus, Elizabeth’s roof that keeps her dry, Elizabeth’s food that nurtures the tiny child beginning to grow within Mary. In return, for these three months Elizabeth’s house is blessed by the hidden presence of The Messiah.

This gospel story is, then, the story of a visit like no other. Elizabeth offers hospitality, and in return she is blessed by the presence of the Lord. It makes all our travels and visits look rather mundane and ordinary! But there is, in this, a pattern for our own lives. I imagine that over the next week or two pretty well all of us will either be travelling to visit family and friends, or else welcoming others as visitors, or possibly both. As we open the door to welcome guests, or as we ring the bell and wait to be let in, we might recall this simple little story of Mary and Elizabeth. Elizabeth welcomed Mary, and in doing so she offered shelter and nurture not only to her cousin, but also to her Saviour. Every human being, whoever they may be, is made in the image and likeness of God, and so when we welcome anyone to our home, we are welcoming the Lord. It must be a part of our hospitality to see within the visitor on the doorstep the hidden presence of Christ. True hospitality is to offer a welcome such as we would offer to the Lord himself. Elizabeth instantly recognises not just Mary, but also the true significance of the child that she is carrying, and it is this which makes her welcome a pattern for every host who tries to see the hidden Christ within every guest. But there is also a message here for the visitor. Mary hurries to see her cousin, and in doing so she brings Christ into the house of Elizabeth. It is tempting to see the role of guest as a kind of consumer role, someone who just soaks up all the attention that they receive, but that is not what we see in Mary’s visit to Elizabeth. Mary comes to Elizabeth’s house not just to receive (although no doubt there is that) but also to bring Christ into Elizabeth’s home. If the Christian host must make some attempt to recognise Christ in every guest, the Christian guest has a reciprocal role, the role of bringing Christ into the home of the one who has invited them. Of course,

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this is not about preaching, but it is about words and actions. It challenges us to accept hospitality as Christ would, to act as he would, and to speak as he would.

Mary's visit to Elizabeth left the two women full of joy. Mary found joy in being a guest and in receiving the love, kindness and hospitality of Elizabeth; Elizabeth found joy in being a host, because Mary brought not only her own companionship but also the presence of the Lord. May our own travels in the coming Christmas season, our own hosting and our own visiting be as rewarding. May we find joy in seeing Christ present in all those we greet, and in bringing Christ into the homes of all those we visit.

Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of us all, pray for us in these last days of Advent; help us to see beyond the busyness and the activity, so that we never lose sight of the real meaning of the coming feast. Help us to see your Son present in everyone we meet, and most particularly in the visitors we welcome; and help us to bring the presence of Christ into every home we visit, so that in all we say and all we do God's holy name may be praised and blessed. We ask this in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.