



Madonna and Child, by Raphaël or Raffaello Sanzio (1483-1520)

THE ADVENT OF CHRIST

Scripture Reflections to Prepare for Christmas

Introduction

This Advent, we are invited to put ourselves into the Jewish world of the first century and discover the spiritual treasures that are packed into practically every line of the gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke (the two gospels that provide the narratives about our Lord's birth). As we do this, our prayer is that this Advent experience will give us a new perspective about the dawn of the Messiah, the Christ.

A booklet containing daily devotions will be published for each week of Advent, and at the end of each daily meditation, a point for reflection and a short prayer will be provided.

Week 3

In Mary's Footsteps: Her Call and Her Journey of Faith

The Third Sunday of Advent - Troubling Words

The angel Gabriel...came to her and said, 'Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!' But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. *Luke 1. 26, 28-29*

Mary's world was about to radically change. Imagine being home alone, walking into a room and finding an angel suddenly standing before you! Anyone would be 'greatly troubled' by the appearance of a heavenly visitor such as this. However, Luke's gospel tells us that Mary is not startled simply by the angel itself, but by the angel's *greeting*. Why might Mary be troubled by the angel's words?

Firstly, the angel says, 'Hail, full of grace.' No one else in the Bible has ever been honoured by an angel with such an exalted title. The Greek word *kecharitomene*, which here is translated 'full of grace', indicates that Mary already possesses God's saving grace. The Lord has prepared her as a pure and holy temple in which the Christ child will dwell for nine months.

Secondly, the angel says, 'The Lord is with you!' Although many of us may be used to hearing 'The Lord be with you' repeated throughout the Mass, we might not be as familiar with the powerful significance these words had in ancient Judaism. In fact, these words often accompanied an invitation from God to play a crucial role in his plan for salvation. Such a divine calling (made to people like Isaac, Jacob, Joshua, Gideon and David) generally entailed great sacrifices and challenged them to step out of their comfort zones and put their trust in God as never before.

At the same time, these words offered assurance that they would not face these challenges alone. They would not have to rely solely on their own abilities and talents, because God's presence and protection would be with them throughout their mission.

With these words, Mary probably realises that much is being asked of her. At the same time, the greeting tells her that she will not have to face these difficulties alone. God gives her the one thing she needs most: the assurance that he will be with her.

For Reflection

In light of the biblical background for the words, 'The Lord be with you', what does this prayer of the priest at Mass tell me about *my mission* as a Christian?

Prayer

Lord, help me to remember that you are with me in my Christian vocation. Make me aware of your Spirit's guidance, and give me the courage to step out of my comfort zone and trust you more. Amen.

Monday of Advent 3 - Favour with God

And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.' Luke 1. 30

Through the words of the angel, we learn more of Mary's mission. Like the phrase, 'the Lord be with you', the notion of finding 'favour with God' would also bring to mind a whole roster of Old Testament covenant mediators who were set apart for a special mission in God's plan of salvation. It describes

someone to whom God has entrusted much.

Noah was the first person in the Bible described as finding favour with God (Genesis 6. 8). God saved him and his family from the flood and gave him a covenant to be the head of a renewed human family. The next person to find favour with God was Abraham (Genesis 18. 2-3). God made a covenant with him, calling on his family to be the instrument through which he would bring blessing to all the nations of the world. Similarly, Moses, the covenant mediator who led Israel out of slavery in Egypt, found favour with God (Exodus 33. 12-17), as did David, for whom God established a kingdom (2 Samuel 15. 25).

Like these great covenant mediators of the Old Testament, Mary has found favour with God. She now is called to serve as an important co-operator in the divine plan to bring salvation to all the nations. In fact, the angel tells Mary, 'You will conceive in your womb and bear a son...He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High' (Luke 1. 31, 32).

Mary will bear a Son who will bring Israel's history to its climax. She will be the Mother of Israel's long-awaited Messiah-King.

For Reflection

How well am I fulfilling the responsibilities God has entrusted to me - in my family, my work, my parish or my community? What can I do to live these out more faithfully 'in God's favour'?

Prayer

Dear Lord, help me this Advent season to be a better channel of what you have entrusted to me. Show me ways to be more faithful wherever you have placed me. Amen.

Tuesday of Advent 3 - What Child is this?

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I have no husband?' And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.' Luke 1. 34-35

Gabriel underscores the extraordinary type of motherhood to which Mary is being called, and we are given the first clear indication of the virginal conception of the Messiah.

Furthermore, we see that Jesus's filial relationship with God far surpasses that of any king in David's dynasty. Jesus will be called Son of God not simply because

of his role as Davidic heir (2 Samuel 7. 14; Psalm 2. 7, 89. 26-27) and Messiah, but because of his unique divine origin.

The Church Fathers also saw the virginal conception as a sign that the divine Son of God really became human, taking the flesh of his Mother, Mary. God did not just *appear* as a man, but he really became one of us in Jesus, experiencing birth, life, suffering and even death.

For Reflection

Do I recognise Jesus as both the divine Son of God and the human Son of Man, the God who truly became one of us?

Prayer

Come, Lord Jesus. Reign in power and might over your people. Capture our hearts so that we can be faithful members of your kingdom.

Wednesday of Advent 3 - Mary's Decision

And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her. Luke 1. 38

Think of all that Mary has just learned. She will soon be expecting a baby; this child is the long-awaited Messiah who will restore Israel's kingdom and bring the history of the world to its climactic moment; she will conceive not through natural means, but by the Holy Spirit; and the child will be the divine Son of God. A lot to take in from one short conversation with an angel!

What is interesting about Mary's response is that the Greek word in this verse for 'let it be to me' expresses not a passive acceptance but a *joyful wishing or desiring* on Mary's part. Upon hearing of her extraordinary maternal mission, she positively desires it and fully embraces God's call.

This is why many scholars - Roman Catholic and Protestant alike - recognise Mary as the first Christian disciple and a model follower of Jesus. In Luke's gospel, Jesus says that those who hear the word of God and keep it are blessed and are included in his family of disciples (Luke 8. 21). Mary fits this description better than anyone else in Luke's gospel. From the very beginning, she accepts God's word from the angel Gabriel and calls herself the servant of the Lord.

Furthermore, Mary is counted amongst the 'blessed' disciples in Luke's gospel. Not only will Elizabeth call Mary blessed for believing God's word (1. 45), but Mary herself will say that *all generations* will call her blessed (1. 48). Similarly, like a good disciple who hears God's word and keeps it, Mary will 'keep in her heart' the angel's joyous message at Jesus's birth (2. 19) and Christ's words to her

when she finds him in the temple (2. 51).

Finally, in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke shows Mary persevering in faithfulness, devoting herself to prayer and to the life of the early Christian community in the days following her Son's resurrection and ascension into heaven (Acts 1. 14). Throughout her life, therefore, Mary's acceptance of God's word is exemplary. Her obedience anticipates the response many will make to Christ's call to follow him in his public ministry and throughout the Christian era.

Mary's faith also serves as a model for how we as Christians should follow Christ today. Like Mary, we should respond to God's word promptly, joyfully and with a servant's heart: not simply with a passive acceptance, but with an active embrace and hunger to do God's will.

For Reflection

Is there an area in my life where I can imitate Mary and more joyfully embrace God's will?

Prayer

Lord, help me to be more like Mary and to lovingly seek to live my life for your purposes, not just my own. Amen.

Thursday of Advent 3 - Blessed Among Women

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the child leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'

Luke 1. 39-42

Mary is a wonderful example of a blessed disciple in action. Mary's own pregnancy does not keep her from going to help Elizabeth in her time of need.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth has prophetic insight into the uniqueness of Mary's motherhood. Not only does she realise that Mary is pregnant, but she understands that Mary has become the Mother of Israel's Messiah. In awe over the mystery taking place in Mary's womb, Elizabeth, in extraordinary fashion, honours her younger kinswoman and acknowledges her as 'the mother of my Lord' and 'blessed among women'.

Let us consider what these titles would have meant in ancient Judaism. 'My Lord' was a court expression given to honour the anointed king (2 Samuel

24. 21; Psalm 110. 1). Thus, when Elizabeth addresses Mary as ‘the mother of my Lord’, she is recognising her as the royal mother of Israel’s Messiah. And this is no small honour, for as the mother of the King, Mary would be seen as the queen in her Son’s kingdom. In the ancient kingdom of Judah, the queenship was given not to the king’s wife, but to the king’s mother.

Next, the description ‘blessed among women’ would bring to mind the Old Testament heroines Jael and Judith. After Jael defeated a pagan general who was oppressing God’s people, the prophetess Deborah proclaimed, ‘Most blessed of women be Jael’ (Judges 5. 24). Similarly, when Judith defeated a pagan commander who was attempting to overtake a Jewish town, Uzziah said to her, ‘O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all women on earth’ (Judith 13. 18). Jael and Judith were blessed specifically because the Lord used them to rescue his people from the attacks of their enemies.

Standing in this tradition, Mary too will be instrumental in God’s plan for saving Israel. However, Mary’s role has one crucial difference from those of these warrior women of old. Mary will not be engaging in physical battle. Rather, she will participate in God’s saving plan through the Son she is carrying in her womb.

Elizabeth tells Mary that she is ‘blessed among women’ because ‘blessed is the fruit of your womb.’ Mary is blessed because she will bear Israel’s Messiah, and he will be the one to accomplish God’s ultimate plan of salvation.

For Reflection

How is my relationship with Mary? What petitions could I bring to her, knowing she is a loving intercessor for us with her Son, Jesus?

Prayer

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Friday of Advent 3 - The Ark of the Covenant

Elizabeth...exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘...And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?’ Luke 1. 41, 42, 43

Luke’s narrative highlights Jesus’s exalted status most profoundly by portraying his Mother in ways that would recall for the first-century Jew the most sacred vessel in all of Israel: the ark of the covenant.

The ark had housed three objects of great importance: a jar containing the manna that fed the Israelites in the time of Moses; the remains of the stone tablets upon which God had written the Ten Commandments; and the staff of Aaron, the first high priest of Israel (Hebrews 9. 4). Most importantly, the holy presence of God hovered over the ark in the form of a cloud.

Even before the visitation scene, Luke's gospel hints at parallels between Mary and the ark. In Luke 1. 35 the angel Gabriel tells Mary, 'the power of the Most High shall overshadow you.' The Greek verb Luke uses for *overshadow* is the same verb used in Exodus 40. 35 to describe how God's presence and glory in the form of a cloud overshadowed the sanctuary which housed the ark of the covenant.

Luke's portrayal of Mary's journey to visit Elizabeth brings to mind a climactic moment from the life of David. David went up from the hill country of Judah to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. On the way there David, in awe of God's power in the ark, paused and said, 'How can the ark of the Lord come to me?'. The ark remained in the house of Obededom for three months, blessing Obededom and all his household. Then the ark was brought up to Jerusalem in a grand procession, with the people rejoicing and shouting and with King David himself leaping and dancing before it (2 Samuel 6. 2, 9, 10-11, 15, 16).

Just like the ark, Mary travelled to the hill country of Judah. Mary remained in the house of Zechariah about three months. As the people in Jerusalem welcomed the ark with shouting and rejoicing, so Elizabeth 'exclaimed with a loud cry' when she greeted Mary. And John the Baptist *leapt* in Mary's womb when Mary drew near (Luke 1. 39, 40, 56, 42, 41).

Finally, just as David asked on the ark's arrival, 'How can the ark of the Lord come to me?' so Elizabeth welcomed Mary 'And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?' (Luke 1. 43).

Perhaps the most striking parallel between Mary and the ark of the covenant comes in Luke 1. 42, which tells us that Elizabeth 'exclaimed' when she greeted Mary. The Greek verb for exclaim that Luke chose for this verse (*anaphonein*) is used also to depict the shouting of the Levitical priests in song and praise before the ark of the covenant. Like those Levites of old, Elizabeth shouts praises (*anaphonein*) before her Lord, residing in Mary's womb. Luke thus portrays Mary like the ark of the covenant, and fittingly so.

Just as the ark carried the manna, so Mary carries in her womb the child who will be known as the true Bread of life (John 6. 48-51). Just as the ark carried the Ten Commandments, so Mary bears the one who is the fulfilment of the Law

(Matthew 5. 17). And just as the ark carries the staff of the high priest Aaron, so does Mary carry in her womb the true High Priest who will offer his life on the cross for our sins (Hebrews 8. 1-7).

For Reflection

Today's reflection shows how an attentive reading of the Bible can draw out the beautiful connections between the Old and the New Testaments and the unity of God's plan. How can I make Scripture study a more regular part of my life?

Prayer

Lord, thank you for your inspired Word in Scripture. Help me to appreciate all the wonders of your plan of salvation as it unfolds in the Bible. Amen.

Saturday of Advent 3 - The Magnificat

Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.' Luke 1. 46

If we were living in first-century Judea, many of the words from Mary's song would sound very familiar to our ears. It would remind us of the song of Hannah on becoming the mother of Samuel after years of barrenness. Hannah's song begins: My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord (1 Samuel 2. 1).

Both Hannah's and Mary's songs praise the Lord as Saviour and acknowledge him as holy. Both go on to announce how the mighty and the rich will be cast down, while the lowly and the poor will be raised up. Those who have their fill will come away empty, whilst the hungry will hunger no more. These parallels demonstrate that Mary views herself as standing in the tradition of women like Hannah whom God has raised up from their afflictions.

Like Hannah, Mary has conceived a child through the miraculous intervention of God in her life. Like Hannah, Mary will dedicate her Son in the temple (Luke 2. 22-24). Like Hannah, Mary responds with a song of praise and thanksgiving for the providential child she is given.

For Reflection

If I had a song of praise like Hannah and Mary did, for what would I thank the Lord?

Prayer

Lord, I make Mary's and Hannah's songs my own. I, too, praise you and thank you for the blessings you have bestowed on my life. Amen.