

Let us pray.

Like the sun in the morning sky, the Saviour of the world will dawn; like rain upon the meadows, the Christ will come down upon us. Amen.

This week is the fourth week of Advent - the week we focus the theme of love and on the important part Mary has to play in our devotional preparations for Christmas. Or should that Joseph?

On this Sunday last year, our lectionary gave us the reading from Luke's Gospel with the Angel Gabriel visiting Mary to announce that she had been chosen to bear God's own Son, the Christ-child<sup>1</sup>, and Mary pondering 'How can this be?'.<sup>2</sup> The year before, we had the meeting between Elizabeth and Mary, also from Luke's Gospel,<sup>3</sup> with Elizabeth declaring those famous words to Mary, that form part of the devotional prayer we now call the Hail Mary, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb'. Elizabeth continues: 'And Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord'.<sup>4</sup> This year we have the reading from Mathew's Gospel of Joseph's visit by an angel in a dream.<sup>5</sup> This Angel visitation helps Joseph to overcome his fears, change his mind and become the stable husband and earthly father-figure Mary and Jesus will need to rely on in the years to come.

You know what strikes me as the most remarkable thing about these stories? Each character has a ready acceptance to receive a message from God and to believe it will come true. They do not dismiss, question or deny God's call, no matter how difficult. In fact, they see it as the remarkable blessing it is.

There is not one of these individuals who will not have to pay a huge cost because of their faith in God. Elizabeth, giving birth to the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist, will have to watch on anxiously as her son begins a ministry of prophecy, calling all in Israel to repentance, rich and poor, lowly and powerful. It is a ministry that will eventually lead to his head being served up on a platter to an erotic dancer, Heredia's daughter.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:26-38

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:34

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:39-55

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:42b & 45

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 1:18-25

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 14:1-12

For Mary, she is given fair warning almost immediately that Jesus will bring about the falling and rising of many<sup>7</sup>... 'so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed'. And that a sword will pierce her own soul too.<sup>8</sup> And of course, the journey ultimately leads her to have to cradle the dead body of Jesus in her arms as they lower it from the executioner's cross, as a sickening mirror-image of when she cradled him at his birth.

For Joseph, it all starts immediately. He accepts the truth of the message the angel delivers him in his sleep, and has a heart big enough to hold fast to his young fiancée, whatever may lay in store for them. Joseph is then forced to travel with his heavily pregnant partner many days journey to register in his ancestral home of Bethlehem. They are homeless, can find no lodgings and are forced to sleep in a stable. Then, soon after the baby is born, the family will have to flee into exile in Egypt to escape the wrath of the jealous King Herod. And we can imagine this refugee-life of the Holy Family including all the difficulties we see refugees going through today. We should think on that when we are feeling all too ready to judge.

It seems Joseph may have died by the time Jesus is an adult and exercising his ministry. The last we see of Joseph in the Gospels is when he and Mary are searching for Jesus after they lose him at the Temple when Jesus is twelve years old. But my goodness doesn't Joseph go through the mill ensuring this special child remains loved, cared for and safe. Adoption can be a challenging calling.

But not once do we get a sense of Joseph having any regrets about the path God has asked him to follow. Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph – all persevere, all stick to their calling and all remain true to God to the very end.

Our faith is lived in the radiance of these courageous "yes-es" to God. And they are yes-es that we see mirrored in the lives of the Apostles and the Saints throughout time. Without each individual taking personal responsibility for their calling and responding to God with a courageous 'yes', there could be no faith, and no better world. It is the 'yes' that sees St Francis choosing a life of poverty to engage with the poor or Mother Theresa saying everyone should visit the backstreets of Calcutta to meet God.

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 2:33-35

<sup>8</sup> Luke 2:34-35

So, this week, the fourth week of Advent, the week we are called to focus upon the theme of love in our preparations in the build-up to receiving Christ at Christmas, the examples of Mary, Joseph and Elizabeth have much to teach us.

First, the importance of remaining true to God, throughout. If we truly wish to master the ability to love unconditionally, in the way Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph love unconditionally, then we have to remain connected to the eternal source of love, which is our living God.

Second, is perseverance, even when we are unsure where God may be leading us. Despite all the prophecies and warnings, Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph could not have known exactly where their journeys would take them. They are each remarkable because, having said 'yes' to God, they persevere. I wonder if perseverance isn't possibly the most undervalued Christian trait. For each of us, it will be our perseverance in faith that will set us apart.

The third point is not unrelated: it's not following our inclination to run away from God when things get tough or when his call challenges us. God calls each and every one of us. Discerning that calling can be tough. It will not always lead us in the directions we would normally wish to go. It might not be comfortable. But God always has a plan, and it is the most remarkable and miraculous plan you'll ever be a part of. It's a plan which, if we are true, will lead to the Christ-child being born afresh in the manger of our hearts on Christmas day!

Let us pray:

Dayspring from on high, dawn in our hearts this Christmas. Amen.