

ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

St Paul's Parish, Gävle, Sweden.

Texts: 2 Sam. 7: 1-5; 8b-11, 16; Ps. 88; Rom. 16: 25-27; Luke 1:26-38.

”I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me”. Dear brothers and sisters, these words spoken by the Virgin of Nazareth, are for our instruction in faith and hope. God chose Mary to be the Mother of Jesus – who is God-made-man. For this reason he prepared her before time began – sanctified her – made her worthy to be the Mother of the Saviour of the human race. This was all in fulfilment of the promises that God made to David – as we have heard in the First Reading of today.

But did the young maiden – the daughter of Joachim and Anna - know about all these mysteries in detail? Did God give her special insight to understand the depths of the Divine plan? No. What God did was to fill her with faith and love - to trust him completely and to love him above all things. As we listen to the Gospel text, our minds are filled with admiration and pride for Mary. But Mary’s encounter with the angel was not an easy experience for her. Here is a young maiden who receives a strange guest – a guest who tells her what no ear has heard and no eye has seen.

See what I mean, dear brothers and sisters, when the Angel greeted her, ***“Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you”***, St Luke tells us, ***”She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean”***. She did not understand what was happening: she was disturbed – “deeply disturbed.” To be “deeply disturbed” is to be afraid because something frightening is taking place.

But Mary is holy – she is pure, full of faith – she trusted the Lord. And that is why when the Angel Gabriel gave his message, which did not explain everything – that she would be pregnant, although she is a virgin: it would not be the natural process of the meeting of a man and a woman, she gently asked, “But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?”

Mary’s gentle question made the angel to tell her aspects of the ***Mystery of the Incarnation***. It is all to be by the power of the Holy Spirit – the power of the Most High will cover her.

The added information about the miracle of Elizabeth’s pregnancy in her old age was meant to remind the Virgin that ***“nothing is impossible for God”***. Even with all the overwhelming experience, God still respected Mary’s freedom to accept or to refuse the Divine vocation. At that moment, both God and humanity waited for Mary’s answer. And she gave it! ***“I am the handmaid of the Lord let what you have said be done to me.”***

We certainly admire Mary for her generosity but there is much more we should do.

We cannot forget that Mary as the Mother of Christ and so Mother of the members of Christ’s Body, the Church, is put before us as a perfect example of true discipleship. We are to imitate, her faith, her docility, her chastity and her charity. Here is her secret, which the Angel tells us: she is full of grace. And she is full of grace because of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Mary is filled with the Holy Spirit. The angel’s own words confirm this fact. All the virtues of Mary are the manifestations of the presence of the Holy Spirit in her.

Mary is ever Virgin. The demand of the virtue of virginity is not an exclusive reserve for priests and religious. It is the vocation of every Christian. Sexual relationship has its place only in valid marriage as ordained by God. Outside marriage, all are called to holy virginity, according to one’s

state. Mary was betrothed to Joseph but remained a virgin. Many people are afraid that their peers would laugh at them as being out of fashion if they do not indulge in pre-marital sex. Some others are afraid to be seen to be archaic or a religious freak. Please, do not be afraid to be called names. Rather, be afraid of the Almighty who has called us all to a life of purity. Mary is ever Virgin and so can intercede for us to obtain the grace of chastity.

Mary is docile. Her docility made her to receive the mysterious guest and the overwhelming message from the Most High. The noise around us often distracts us and prevents us from being open to the inflow of Divine grace. It was Mary's docility that made it possible for her to make that timeless confession of total faith and abandonment in God. She put all her trust in the God whom she knew could not deceive her. All through the Scripture whenever she is mentioned, she is shown to be docile to the will of God.

My beloved, I can go on and on enunciating the virtues of the Mother of our Redeemer.

But this will do us little good except if we ask ourselves how the example of Mother Mary can help us in the situation we find ourselves today. The current financial crisis in the world has made life very hard for many people. For many, this Christmas celebration is unlike before. Rather than be depressed that the financial markets have crashed, the industries are closing and the banks are groaning, this situation offers us a reason for sober reflection. Two things come to mind. We think about those whose condition has always been worse than what some of us are experiencing now. That is to say that the hardship we have been thrown into is nothing compared with what has been the normal life experience of millions of our fellow human beings who live in poor countries. We also learn that the teaching of the Lord Jesus is worthy of all trust: "Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and wormwood (read "market forces") can destroy them... But store up treasures in heaven where neither moth nor wormwood destroys them... For where your treasure is there will heart be too" (Matt. 6: 19-21). We have seen how foolish it is to serve money rather than God. And hopefully we have learnt that we cannot be slave of both God and money.

We are children of Mary. So the words that Angel Gabriel spoke to our Mother are also meant for us: "**Do not be afraid ... for nothing is impossible for God.**" The Son of Mary is called Jesus, the Saviour. But he is also called Immanuel. He is God-with-us. In every situation we find ourselves, we should not lose hope. We are Mary's children and our Brother is Jesus – **Immanuel**.

Mary is docile and with a docile heart professed, "I am the handmaid of the Lord." This is a perpetual challenge. We are called to live in such a way that we can honestly use Mary's words, "I am the handmaid – I am the servant of the Lord – let whatever you have destined for me be done to me."

"My soul magnifies the Lord

My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...

The Almighty has done great things for me

Holy is his name" (Luke 1:46f).

Fr Damian O. Eze, MSP

Gävle, Sweden

21 December 2008.