

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C

Micah 5:1-4

Psalm 79

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-44

Christmas is near. Our preparation to receive the Lord is almost complete. The anticipation is building.

As children we probably struggled to wait for Christmas as it drew near. But if you think about it, our Lord was waiting for Christmas from the beginning of creation. When—through the complex web of time and space, the Divine Word brought forth human beings from the clay and decided that mothers should carry their child for nine months before giving birth—he was thinking of Mary. And he was thinking of those nine months that he would dwell within the womb of his own creature – of the nine months that he would listen to her heart beat and hear her gentle voice speak to him in the darkness. And he was thinking about how he would spend thirty-three years working to extend that closeness he would have with his mother to all of humanity – how he would eventually give his life over for all, pour himself out to the last drop so that he could become food – food that would allow him to dwell with us and make us pregnant with his life, so that we too could give birth to his kingdom in the world.

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So Mary's just been hit with this bombshell by the Archangel Gabriel. She's just been told that she's going to be the mother of the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of the Most High God. After such an amazing encounter with such monumental implications, Mary could have been excused for taking some alone-time to take it all in. But instead, her response is to go right away to the aid of her pregnant cousin.

And so before we welcome the Christ child this Christmas, the Church places before us today this beautiful encounter between two pregnant women. And it's most fitting, because the Visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth is a beautiful example of what it looks like when we welcome Christ in an authentic way into our life.

Theologically, this event is not merely a courteous gesture, but it also portrays with great simplicity the encounter of the Old Testament with the New. The two women, both of them then pregnant, embody both expectation... and the Expected One. The elderly Elizabeth symbolises Israel, which is awaiting the Messiah – whereas the young Mary bears within her the fulfilment of this expectation, which would be for the benefit not *just* of Israel, but of the whole human race.

Amazingly, their encounter begins not with themselves, but with the children in their wombs. As Mary arrives and offers her greeting, John and Jesus meet, and—in a miraculous way—they *recognise* each other. John's leap of joy recalls King David's

dancing when he accompanied the entry of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. As you may know, the Ark contained the Tablets of the Law, the manna and Aaron's rod, and was thus the definitive sign of God's presence among his Chosen People. Similarly, the unborn John exults with joy before Mary—the Ark of the *New* Covenant—who in her womb is carrying Jesus, the Son of God made man. What was prefigured in the Old Testament—the presence of God in the Ark, housed in the Jerusalem Temple—is taken to a whole new level in the New Testament, with the presence of God in the flesh, housed for nine months in the temple that is Our Lady's womb. John's exultation in Elizabeth's womb is a sign of the fulfilment of the expectation – God is about to visit his people in a mind-blowing way.

At the Annunciation, Gabriel spoke to Mary of Elizabeth's pregnancy as proof of God's power – that in spite of her old age, this barren woman would bring forth new life. And in her greeting to Mary—prompted by the reaction of John in her womb—Elizabeth recognises something startling – namely, that God's promise to humanity is at last being fulfilled. And so she exclaims: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”

Of course, we are very familiar with this line thanks to its use in the *Hail Mary*, yet this was not actually the first time in the Bible it was used. In the Old Testament, the phrase “blessed are you among women” is used twice – in reference to both Jael and Judith, two women warriors who did their utmost to save Israel. In contrast, it is used here to describe Mary, a peaceful young woman who is about to bring the long-awaited Saviour into the world.

Now, as we all know, good news cannot be hoarded – it needs to be shared with others. Think of a time when you've received wonderful news in your life... you just *had* to tell someone about it – someone who would understand. And so perhaps part of the reason why Mary sought out her cousin Elizabeth—in addition to being an act of charity—was that, as a fellow recipient of the Lord's intervention, Mary knew that Elizabeth would be able receive and share in her joy. Indeed, at that moment, Elizabeth might have been the *only* one who could understand what Mary was going through.

It really is a beautiful scene. And there is much of value that we can draw from it. For instance, we can strive to imitate Mary, visiting those who are in need, and striving to share the Lord's presence with them. We can also strive to imitate Elizabeth, and welcome our guests this Christmas—for instance—as though they were Christ himself. As Pope Benedict XVI once said, if we do not wish for it, we shall never know the Lord; without expecting him, we shall not meet him; without looking for him, we shall not find him. So let us go to meet the Lord who comes with the same joy as Mary, and welcome him with the same warmth as Elizabeth.

Let us pray that all men and women of good will may seek the Lord, and discover that it is God himself who comes to visit them first. And let us entrust our hearts to

Mary—the Ark of the New and Eternal Covenant—so that she may make them worthy to receive God’s visit in the mystery of his Birth.

Come Lord Jesus, come and make new our hearts, come and make new our world.
Amen.