

## **Fourth Sunday of Advent C/2009**

Life is full of wonderful encounters, some of which are decisive and influential for the orientation of our future. Think about the encounter you have had and which has opened up your life, and has made of you a husband or a wife you are today. Think about the encounter you have done in particular circumstances of life and which have been crucial in the decision you made to pursue your career in the direction in which it is today.

The readings of this Fourth Sunday of Advent speak about the encounter of God and human beings. They invite us to realize that when we meet God in truth, our life changes its course; the unsettlement gives place to peace and joy takes prevalence over bitterness and sadness.

The first reading describes a vision the prophet Micah had about the future of Israel. In that vision, God promises to take care of his people through the mediation of a king he was about to give them. That king will be from the clan of Judah and the city of Bethlehem. That is why the text says that, though Bethlehem-Ephratha is small among the tribes of Judah, from it will come the one who is to be a ruler in Israel.

The rising king will stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the Lord and in the name of his God. He will gather the remnant of Israel so that all his children may return to their land. Under his reign, the greatness of God will reach to the ends of the earth to which he will bring his peace.

Historically speaking, it was under the kingship of David that Israel attained its Golden Age with lasting peace and prosperity. But in truth, all that was short-lived, because time and time again, Israel went into exile and the people returned to their idols and the rejection of God's law. Given such disobedience, God decided to send his only Son Jesus into the world and to fulfill once and for all his promise to save the world from sin and death.

That is why, when talking about Jesus, the letter to Hebrews says that God did not accept sacrifices of animals and offerings as able to reconcile him with his people. Instead, Christ took a body in order to be able to sacrifice himself in total obedience to God. Because disobedience set up a barrier that no sacrifice of animal could take away, Jesus took himself as sacrifice and said to the Father: "Here I come to do your will, O God". The Father in turn has accepted the sacrifice of his body on the cross for the remission of the sins of the world.

In this respect, Christ has abolished the old practice of offering sacrifices in the temple and brought us to the new times. He has eliminated all external worship of God and has established a new worship of God based on the interior conversion of heart and an authentic acceptance of God's will. That is what Advent is all about. Advent reminds us that, if our worship of God in his house is not preceded by an interior conversion of heart and the will to change our life accordingly, we run the risk of being far from the Lord and of missing the joy he brings us.

Mary was able to bring God's joy to her cousin Elizabeth, because she was all pure and totally turned to the Lord. The meeting between Mary and Elizabeth is highly important for us, because it shows us how the encounter with God can transform us and bring us joy.

In fact, by describing for us the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, the Gospel brings us to the top of an encounter between God, represented by Jesus in the womb of Mary, and the human beings, represented by John the Baptist in the womb of Elizabeth.

Mary and Elizabeth represent us as human beings, and what we are before God. Elizabeth is the symbol of all those who bear a certain hope in their heart. She is the symbol of those that the Lord has consoled in their distress. Like Elizabeth, many of us have been visited by the Lord and comforted in our time of trouble and problems. How grateful and thankful shall we be before the Lord!

Mary is the symbol of the interior world, a world of silence, of all that we bear in us as mystery, and perhaps as problems, that nobody knows except God and people to whom we open our hearts. Mary has received the great news of being the mother of the Son of God, and she bears that in her heart, like a treasure, in the silence of her heart.

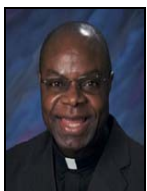
As I often say, “human heart is like a vase of mystery”. Nobody knows what is in the heart of someone until the day it is revealed. I wonder if it is not human and even natural that people have secrets or an interior chamber where they keep in storage small things that nobody knows than them! But what is all that before God?

Look how the Holy Spirit of God has revealed to Elisabeth that Mary is pregnant. As it can be seen, there is no secret for God; he knows everything about us like in an open book. This knowledge fills us with awe, trust and confidence that we are in the hands of One who loves us and can do something for us when we are in trouble.

The Gospel says that once Mary has crossed the threshold of her cousin and greeted her, the child in her womb leaped for joy. How wonderful it would be that, in this Christmas season as families and friends, we could bring joy and peace to others! How wonderful it would be that, when friends and families visit us, they can find us peaceful and joyful, and not aggressive and rejecting!

When we welcome peacefully those who come to visit us, at the end of such a visit God will bless us with his joy. That is the experience Elizabeth has done and which each one of us can also do if one is opened to God’s grace. At the end of that visit, Elizabeth claims loudly, “Blessed are you among women... Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled”. Let us accept to spend this Christmas in the spirit and at the example of Mary and Elisabeth, all welcoming, peaceful and joyful! May God bless you all!

**Micah 5, 1-4a; Hebrews 10, 5-10; Luke 1, 39-45**



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