

Fourth Sunday of Advent B - "He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly."

December 24, 2023.

Given the peculiarities of our calendar, we have the one-in-seven-year event of the Fourth Sunday of Advent falling on the same day as Christmas Eve. Liturgically, if we are a Christmas Eve mass goer, we are obliged to attend two masses this Sunday. Like at St Paul Parish, the Sunday masses are 9:00 am and 11:00 am, the Christmas Eve masses, 5:00 pm, 7:00 pm and 9:00 pm.

This Sunday, our Advent liturgy takes on a new focus. In the past Sundays, the theme of the Saviour's 'coming' has made us aware of the unfolding of God's plan for creation. Luke's gospel of the Annunciation – emphasizing the fact that the coming of the Saviour depended upon Mary's consent – reminds us of the mystery that is basic to our existence as persons, that we must all play our part in the realization of God's final plan. Our life 'in Christ' is at once gift and task. All that we do, leading to eternal life, begins with the unmerited gifts of God's 'grace', but these gifts bring with them the tasks whereby we realize our true personhood, as followers of Christ.

The Gospel reading (Luke 1:26-38) is wonderful and glorious and brings us to the edge of Christmas. It is the story of the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel is sent by God to the town of Nazareth, to a virgin whose name was Mary. His announcement: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." In our Gospel, Gabriel explains: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." This is The Good News!

Mary sings the Good News of the Incarnation to break into our Advent anticipation with a description of the coming Reign of God. In the angel Gabriel's visit to lowly Mary, and then in Mary's beautiful hymn of praise, the Magnificat, we begin to hear what the Kingdom of God is like; it is a world turned upside down. Mary prophetically sings of God's kingdom as if it is an accomplished fact, rather than a coming reality breaking into the here and now. The song uses an amazing number of past-tense verbs. Everything is already accomplished for Mary. God has already looked with favor on his lowly servant Mary. The almighty already has done great things for her. But as Mary continues to praise God for what God is doing in becoming human, she moves beyond what God has done for her, broadening to include the whole world. Even then, she sings of things to come as if they were accomplished facts. Mary, taking a page from her unborn son's ministry, proclaims that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Listen to these words of Mary's song and ask if the changes in the way the world works have even yet occurred more than 2,000 years later: "He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." There are few kings in the world today, but the seats of power still belong to the mighty. The lowly rarely, if ever, get lifted up. The hungry often continue to go hungry, while those who have seem to get more. Yet, Mary speaks of lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things in the past tense. It is impossible to see Mary's song as merely naïve. No Jew living in Roman-occupied Israel could think the lowly were being lifted up. Instead, Mary has come to see that what God is doing through her is a sign that all of God's promises are as good as fulfilled. God is faithful, and the old way of doing things is as good as gone now that God is becoming human through her child Jesus. God's kingdom is breaking into our world in a new and marvelous way that makes it clear that the lowly are as good as lifted up and the hungry are as good as filled with good things.

Mary's way of looking at the world in her song shows a Biblical view of how this age – the time we live in – relates to the afterlife, the age to come. First, we have this age, our present time, which includes all time, from creation until this day. Alongside that, we can place the age to come. Until Jesus comes in power and glory to usher in the end of the age, the only way to pass from this age to the age to come is death. All time is working its way toward the end of this age and the ushering-in of the age to come. We are slowly but surely pushed

towards eternity, but the two ages seem separate. In the Magnificat, Mary points to the reality that there may be a way in which these two ages intersect. The age to come may break into our present age. The age to come is not present in our own time in its fullness, but as a foreshadowing of what is coming. Mary knows that the birth of the Messiah to her, a lowly Jewish peasant, is an important sign of what God's kingdom looks like. It is in the Incarnation that we get our clearest picture of the age to come. God became flesh, not in the person of Julius Caesar or a great Egyptian Pharaoh. God became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the son of a peasant woman in an occupied land. Without the mighty getting wind of it, they were as good as cast down from their thrones. If the newlywed wife of a carpenter is to give birth to God's son, then the hungry are as good as having their bellies filled, for God is not only ready and willing to bring about the age to come; God is in fact already breaking the age to come into our world in acting counter to the ways of this present age. Mary goes on to sing that this is not some new thing God is doing, but it is in fulfillment of all that God has promised Israel. The God of Israel is now acting in human history in such a way that it will not just break the kingdom of God into this age for the Jews, but for all humanity.

As he begins his ministry, Jesus will affirm the very things his mother now sings. Jesus continually reminded his disciples in different ways that the last would be first, and the first would be last. He preached that those who exalt themselves will be humbled. Jesus said blessed are the poor, the hungry, and those who weep, for God will give them the kingdom, fill them with food, and exchange their tears for laughter. Jesus told his followers that he came to serve, and those who follow him must also be servants. Jesus' whole ministry lived out the words his mother sang, showing how God's kingdom is radically different from our present age. Yes, it is still a fallen and flawed world. The powerful still crush the lowly. More times than not, the rich get richer at the expense of the poor. Those with food have more than enough, while others go hungry. Yet, because of the ways God has broken into human history, we have had glimpses of a different world. Through the life of Jesus, and sometimes through his followers, great saints through the ages, we have seen how wonderful the upside-down world of the gospel really can be. No one is too lowly, too weak, or too undesirable for God. There are no outcasts in God's kingdom. God does not look to the outward signs of status and success, but rather God looks at the content of our heart.

Brothers and sisters, let's use this last week of Advent to make more room in our life for God. The more we allow God into our hearts and lives, the more we will find ourselves loving those whom God loves. Every time we reach out to others to share God's love, we bring the age to come to life into the here and now. As Mary responded, "Here am I," to the angel Gabriel, we too are to respond to the gospel and say, "Yes," to living our faith, with changed hearts and lives. This is not as a theory to which we give assent, but a life lived in response to the gospel. Just as Mary, in the freedom of her heart said 'Yes' to God many times and gave the total gift of herself to God, we too must turn to Mary our mother and learn from her to listen and wait for the Lord to come. The Lord does not only want to come to us and become one of us but he wants us to become like him. We must be willing to bring Christ into our world as Mary did for she built her life into a fit place for God and we must do the same. When we live our faith, reaching out to the lost and deserted, and proclaim the Good News in both word and deed, then little by little we help turn the world upside down. When we side against the oppressor and speak up for the voiceless, we make the Kingdom proclaimed by Mary real to ourselves. It is not that we can change the whole world, but by living into the concern that Jesus taught us for the poor and the needy, we make the coming kingdom, the reign of God, real in our hearts. Then we have Mary's eyes to see that the mighty are as good as cast down, the lowly as good as lifted up, and the hungry are as good as filled, for the Kingdom of God has come near.