

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B) (revised 2017)

A) INTRODUCTION: CHRISTMAS CARD

- I have a friend who is an amateur photographer, and a very good one too
- he often turns his photographs into Christmas cards
- one year he sent me a card based on a photo he had taken while he was visiting an abbey in Switzerland
- it is a depiction of the Annunciation, with Gabriel the Archangel, kneeling before a bewildered Mary and inviting her to be the mother of God's Son
- above them, the Holy Spirit is hovering, waiting for her response
- but there is a detail in the picture which seems strange and unusual: in the alcove between the two figures you can just make out the Roman numerals, one to ten
- I wondered what they meant and why they were there
- I think it is a reference to today's First Reading

B) OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

- One of the most treasured possessions of the Jewish people was the Ark of the Covenant, the special box or chest containing the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments
- it was regarded as a symbol of God's presence among his people, caring for them and protecting them
- David, the second and the greatest of the Kings of Israel, longs to build a Temple, a home for the Ark of the Covenant.
- But through the prophet Nathan, he learns that the Temple will be built by a descendant of his, in fact, his son King Solomon.
- God then goes on to promise him that David's own family will rule Israel forever.
- So while David wanted to build a house for God, God intends to establish a house or dynasty in David and his family.
- This prophecy IS fulfilled, not as David would expect, but in Jesus, the Universal King.

C) JESUS: SON OF DAVID

- Gabriel comes to a virgin betrothed to a man called Joseph of the House of David
- When Gabriel speaks to Mary about her child, he tells her:
- The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever, and his reign will have no end.
- In accepting to be the mother of the Messiah, Mary herself becomes the new Ark of the Covenant,
- the place where God's word is kept safe, and where God still dwells with his people.
- His word is no longer carved on tablets of stone, but becomes a living human being within her.

D) JESUS: SON OF GOD

- How CAN this come about, Mary asks, since I am a Virgin? I have consecrated myself completely to God
- The angel replies: The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow.
- At the beginning of Genesis, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters, about to perform the great work of creation.
- Here, that divine power overshadows Mary, about to perform a new and wonderful act of creation.
- God will bring about a new order of being, a new relationship between Himself and humanity, embodied and personified in Jesus.
- So Gabriel explains to Mary that her child will have a dual identity: he will be a human being, a Son of David
- but he will also be a "Holy One", in a unique way the Son of God
- that is an expression of our Christian faith as to who this Jesus is

E) MARY'S RESPONSE

- the most wonderful response of any human being to the will of God for them: I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let what you have said be done to me.
- Mary had questioned the angel to begin with, because she had been perplexed.
- I consecrated myself entirely to God, because I thought that is what he wanted of me; but now he is asking me to be a mother
- But, once she knows the divine purpose, she accepts that purpose unhesitatingly and with perfect simplicity.
- She will never go back on that promise, no matter what happens to her.
- She co-operates with God's plan for her, joyfully, willingly, actively.
- so the Ten Commandments in this Christmas Card can also be seen as a sign of Mary's faithfulness to God's will for her

F) MARY, THE FIRST CHRISTIAN AND THE FIRST DISCIPLE

- Mary is the first person to hear the Good News of the Gospel
- so she is the very first Christian
- but she is also the very first disciple, because she accepts the word of God, and hastens to put it into practice
- as soon as she learns of the pregnancy of her cousin Elizabeth. she hurries to respond, with generosity and joy
- may we seek to do the same.

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