

Advent 4 2018 'A body I have prepared'

Today on this last Sunday of Advent we turn our attention to St Mary who gave herself freely to God and makes the birth of Christ possible. The words of Hebrews are also hers: 'I come to do thy will'. She gave her consent to the Incarnation in the Annunciation scene preceding today's gospel: 'I am the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to thy will' in the beautiful words of the AV. On your sheet you have Botticelli's elegant and powerful presentation of that moment. Mary offers her acceptance in that hand reaching out towards the angel, in the graceful turn of her whole body, which flows towards him full of grace.

Bodies are also to the fore in our gospel in which the pregnant Mary goes with haste to the house of her even more pregnant cousin Elizabeth. Without knocking she hurries right inside to find her cousin, and baby John in the womb leaps in recognition of the Christ Child within Mary, as Our Lady's greeting brings blessing. The physicality of that encounter between the two women is beautifully conveyed in Jacques Daret's picture in which Elizabeth's hand rests gently on Mary's stomach, prophetically discerning the Christ within. Elizabeth's other hand is raised in priestly blessing. There was a tradition in medieval Christianity that through Mary's salutation, the unborn Christ already confirmed John the Baptist with the gift of the Spirit, and you can see it in the icon where the two unborn children are displayed. In Daret's painting Mary raises no hand because it is in her womb that the blessing is given. Her whole body is an act of grace, as Daret shows by the golden radiance glowing in her face. Jerusalem lies in the background distance, because the action of God and his indwelling is no longer in the temple and its sacrifices but in a person, Mary, and the unseen body of Jesus lies within that holy of holies. So, women who could not even enter the inner courts of the temple, are now bodies bearing the Spirit, and they act in priestly fashion. Elizabeth is saying the words that Christians have repeated down the ages: 'Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb'.

When we think of Advent as a time of waiting, it can seem empty – a stretch of time before the main event. In the life of Our Lady, by contrast, it was a time of plenitude. Luke's gospel has several references to Mary pondering things in her heart. It begins with her 'casting in her mind' what manner of greeting Gabriel brings at her annunciation. It continues after the birth of Jesus and the visit of the shepherds. 'But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart'. And after the strange words about her own destiny spoken by Simeon and those of her Son when she found him in the temple, Mary again keeps all these things in her heart, a heart so full of many graces. Of all the characters in the gospel story, Mary has the most overtly described active inner life, in which she grows in fullness of understanding and insight. And her pregnancy, like that of any other expectant mother, was far from empty. Through her growing womb she communes with her child. Babies growing in the womb make their presence constantly known and famously kick as John the Baptists does as he recognises the Saviour. This intimate relationship prior to birth is why the suggestion that babies be kept in artificial wombs in a laboratory is particularly appalling and distasteful. The time of pregnancy is one of blessing in which a relationship with the child works secretly in the synergy of the mother's body. God entrusted himself to that young girl and her life in those nine months would be determinative on her Son's development, as much as his childhood in the home in Nazareth.

These last few days of Advent should be to us also a time of plenitude. Look again at that Botticelli Annunciation and the space between the hands of the angel and the woman. They hold it and shape it: Christ is conceived within it, in the space between. And what a warmth there is in the space between the faces of the two women in the visitation scene! The monk kneeling beneath catches something of it in his upturned eyes and there is plenty for us too. The windsock floating in that African American painting of the Visitation is the sign the Sisters of the Visitation put up to tell the neighbourhood children that there is after-school play and craft at the convent for them that day. The Visitation is not just a meeting between

two exceptional individuals but includes us all. It is a scene of solidarity that looks forward to the Church, and it is for everyone. Day by day at Evening prayer Mary's liberation song is sung by us all as we live out of the faith that overturns the rich and empowers the poor. 'He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek'. We too live out of the visitation and the space between in which God can act.

People sometimes speak as if devotion to Christ's mother was some sort of added extra, or even devotion taken away from her Son. I would argue, by contrast, that we need Mary at the centre of our common life to show us the life of discipleship, not as one of struggle – though she had her sword in the heart – but overflowing grace. I love that Botticelli image because she is so pliant, so open despite her fear to the angel's invitation: to repeat, so full of grace. There is a famous essay from the Romantic period by Heinrich Kleist about the puppet theatre, which was a common sight in the streets in his day. He commends the marionette because unlike human beings, who are conscious of their movements, the puppet's limbs fall naturally, centred by gravity into a grace our deliberation can never achieve. The puppet's actions are full of a heavenly grace lost to us since the fall. Mary is not a puppet but a human graced by God with the gift of his Son, yet that gift enables her to respond out of a full heart, with an equal natural grace. There is more complexity than a puppet in the poised angle of her hands in the Annunciation scene, as she reaches into the unknown, but her movements have that same weight and centredness that Kleist found in the graced marionette. She bends towards the angel as she is overshadowed by the Holy Spirit.

At this time of panic, as we scurry to get everything together, and motorists hoot impatiently, let us give ourselves to that plenitude of grace and learn from Mary, 'to let God's glory through' as we meet and greet others, in our own local visitations. That grace is latent all around us, even in the inanimate, silent world of things, just waiting to fall into God's grace. As we cook and wrap, or drive and write, let us do so out of that divine fullness, the fullness waiting in Mary's womb, already active and blessing, and preparing us like Mary to

bring him to birth in our own lives. Do not rush forward, but wait, just as the pregnant woman must wait until the child is ready to come out, not thinking of what will be, but what is, of the space between the human and angelic worlds. And say with a full heart the words of Gabriel and Elizabeth: Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.