

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (Dec. 21, 2014)

Over the last several weeks, the liturgy has featured **three biblical figures** each of whom embodies some aspect of what might be called the **Advent spirit: Isaiah** and, with him, the great prophetic tradition of Israel, **John the Baptist**, the immediate precursor and herald of the Messiah, and **Mary the mother** of the One who is to come.

The prophets as a group represent one of the most distinctive features of the biblical tradition. **People of the word**, they are convinced that they have been called by God to speak in God's name. Their message sometimes takes the form of a warning to those who turn their back on God and practice injustice. It is particularly strong in its condemnation of the abuse of the poor and the vulnerable, the kind of thing about which we hear almost daily in the media.

When the Israelites find themselves defeated and driven into exile, the message of the prophets becomes one of hope and consolation. God, they declare, far from abandoning them, has heard their cry and will intervene on their behalf.

In today's first reading, the **prophet Nathan** declares to David that God will not only raise up a descendant to him but will ensure that David's kingdom and David's throne will endure forever. The New Testament and the liturgy understand his prophecy as pointing forward to **Jesus, the true son of David**.

John the Baptist appears at the beginning of all the gospel accounts of the public life of Jesus. He invites people to undergo a conversion of mind and heart, a turning from selfishness and self-centredness, from injustice and indifference, to a life that is open to God and to God's ways. He both points forward to Jesus as the One who is to bring about God's kingdom and

insists on the importance of moral and spiritual conversion as a necessary preparation for his coming.

Mary's role is very different from that of the prophets and John. As a young woman living in a patriarchal culture, she has little opportunity to be a preacher or teacher or to have, in fact, any kind of opportunity to be a public figure able to have an impact on her contemporaries.

Our image of Mary comes largely from the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke. We meet her at the moment of the annunciation as a grace-filled young woman who in a totally unexpected way is invited by God to become the mother of the Messiah, the mother of the Word or Son of God in human form. When she questions how such a thing might be possible, the angel declares: "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God."

Mary's response represents an ideal of the kind of response that we are all invited to make in the face of God's gifts and God's will. "Here am I," she says, "the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." Although formulated in a passive way, her response is anything but passive. It is a response of faith and trust, of obedience and courage. The fact that she goes almost immediately to her elder and pregnant cousin reveals that, as deeply personal as her vocation is, it is inseparable from love and service of others.

Christmas, as indeed the whole of the Christian mystery, involves both gift and response, contemplation and action, the mystical and the prophetic. It all begins with a gift, the gift of life and all that it entails, the gift of grace or of God's friendship, the gift of Jesus and of his life and teaching, his death and resurrection.

The sense that gift is somehow at the very heart of being human can be awakened in us in various ways. For many it begins with our relationship to our mother. We experience her as a source of food and warmth, of protection and consolation. We know we don't deserve it; it is simply given to us.

In a very different context, the thing that I was most aware of after coming out of my by-pass surgery last summer was an overwhelming sense of gratitude, gratitude for life and for what seemed to be a renewal and a prolongation of it. Although I was conscious of my debt to the doctors and others involved in my care, the gratitude I felt was deeper and broader, embracing life itself. Its real object was the God from whom we come, on whom we depend, and to whom one day we will return. It was he ultimately who through the wonders of modern medicine was offering me an extraordinary gift.

If gratitude is the first response to gifts of whatever kind, it cannot be the last. Every significant gift is meant in one way or another to bear fruit in our lives. That is particularly true of gifts that touch us in who and what we are – the gift of life and of talent, of family and of health, of education and of job or career opportunities. Although our possibilities for action vary enormously, we can all do something, something of a positive nature; we can all make a difference in whatever context we happen to find ourselves.

Christmas is about gifts, above all about a gift, the gift of Christ and, with and in him, the **gifts of peace, joy and reconciliation**. Let us welcome him and his gifts. May they so transform our hearts that we are able to share his gifts with those with whom we live and work and come into contact with in the course of a day. That is **my Christmas prayer for us all**.