

4th SUNDAY OF ADVENT – C (December 19, 2021)

Advent is rapidly nearing its end, Christmas is less than a week away, and this delightful gospel gives us the young woman whose baby she carries in her womb would become the One who would turn the world upside down—not to mention reopening the gates of heaven to us once again. Mary, immediately after saying ‘yes’ to God’s desire for her to conceive and give birth to the Savior, goes to greet and rejoice with her cousin Elizabeth. She is also with child, remarkable in itself since she was long past the normal child-bearing age.

Our Christian faith is simply unimaginable without Mary. No, she is not our savior. No, she is not God, and we do not worship her because worship is given to God alone who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And of course God could have saved us in any number of other ways that would have had nothing to do with Mary. But that’s hardly the point—God, in his infinite and divine wisdom, did in fact choose Mary to be the human means by which our Savior would come into the world. Mary is a central figure in world history, in Christian and salvation history, because God wanted and in fact made her so according to his own plan. Those who think we give too much attention to Mary are ultimately going to have to take that up with God himself...

Today’s gospel of the Visitation highlights Mary’s important role, and it does so with great power and joy as well. Elizabeth hears Mary’s greeting, she is filled with the Holy Spirit, and she “...crie[s] out in a loud voice” with joy:

--“Blessed are you among women...”

--“...and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (i.e. the as-yet unborn Jesus).

--“Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”

Notice that Elizabeth is not praying for a blessing on this woman or on the child in her womb. When we say “God bless you” to someone, for example, we are praying for God to bless that person. That’s not what Elizabeth was doing; rather, she was declaring the blessedness of Mary and of her child as a fact, a reality and truth that she knows and affirms because of the Holy Spirit with whom, as St. Luke tells us, she was filled.

And if we go just a few verses farther in this first chapter of Luke’s gospel from where today’s excerpt ends, we have Mary’s response to Elizabeth’s greeting—her Magnificat, her prayer of praise:

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...From this day all generations will call me blessed; the almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.”

Notice what Mary affirms in this prayer:

1. She rejoices in God her Savior. Mary needed to be saved as we all need God’s saving love and mercy; we believe, of course, that she was saved in a unique way by God preserving her from all sin—both original and personal—from the moment of her conception. That’s what we

mean by the Immaculate Conception of Mary in her own mother's womb. But it was God alone who saved and preserved her from sin by his gift and grace; that's why the angel Gabriel greeted and hailed her as "full of grace" at the Annunciation. Mary couldn't save herself any more than we can save ourselves.

2. She also declares that "all generations will call me blessed." Not only did Elizabeth call her 'blessed'; now Mary herself says that she will be called 'blessed'. Is she bragging here in any way; is she wanting to draw attention to herself? Not for a single moment! Mary is simply stating what would become the historical reality; who has not heard her referred to as the Blessed Virgin Mary? And why would "all generations call [her] blessed"? Mary answers that question as well: "...the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." She gives all the credit, she directs all the attention to God who in fact did all those 'great things' for her. Mary knows that her blessedness comes not from herself in any way at all, but instead from God the Almighty—her and our Savior. She is blessed because of what God has done for her: to prepare her—even from the very beginning of her existence in her own mother's womb—to bring Jesus the Savior into the world.

This is why we honor—not worship, but honor—Blessed Mary: because she cooperated freely and fully with the Father's plan to give us his Son through her. We honor Mary, and we love her. There is no question at all that Jesus dearly loved his Mother; it seems only natural that he would want us and that he invites us to love his Mother as well.

Blaise Pascal was a 17th-century French theologian who once wrote: "Without Jesus Christ, we do not know who we are or who God is. We do not know the meaning of our life or of our death. He who knows Him knows the reason for everything." In other words, Jesus Christ is that 'reason for everything'. Peter Kreeft, the Boston College professor who I've mentioned before, adds this to Pascal's words: "Mary knows the reason for everything. The reason for everything [i.e. Jesus] lived in her womb for nine months, in her life for thirty-three years, and in her heart forever" ("The Greatest Philosopher Who Ever Lived", Ignatius Press 2021). No wonder Elizabeth exclaimed to Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb". Mary is blessed because of what God has done for her and, through her, for us. That's why we honor her; that's why we love her.