

4th Sunday of Advent, Year C

GOSPEL

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Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. Now as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord? For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy. Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.'

(Luke 1:39-44)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- In Luke's Gospel, the conception and birth of Jesus are described in parallel with the conception and birth of John the Baptist. One important difference is that the announcement of the miraculous conception of John to elderly parents comes to his father, Zechariah, while the announcement of the conception of Jesus comes to his mother, Mary.
- In Matthew's Gospel, it is Joseph who is the main protagonist, while Luke concentrates on Mary's role in cooperating in God's plan for the world.
- Luke's Gospel pays a great deal of attention to the role that women play in the story of salvation.
- Mary undertakes a journey from Nazareth in Galilee, in the north of Israel, to the hill country of Judah in the south. This is an extraordinary journey for a young pregnant woman of her time to undertake alone!

EXPLORING THE WORD

Elizabeth's response to the visit of her young kinswoman is quite remarkable. She can have had no way of knowing what had happened to Mary, but she receives a sudden intuition from God and is 'filled with the Holy Spirit'. Elizabeth and the child she carries both recognise and respond to an in-breaking of God's action in human history. The revelation to Elizabeth is even more profound when we realise that she rejoices not only because Mary is carrying the long-awaited saviour, but also because she sees that Mary's blessedness is a direct result of her faith. 'Blessed is she who believed that the promise made to her by the Lord would be fulfilled.' It is Mary's willing acceptance of the role God chose for her that has resulted in her being blessed among women.

- Can you think of a time when you 'knew' something without being told? What was the source of your intuition?
- What promises has God made to you? Do you believe the promises that have been made?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer\

- 'You are most blessed.' Do you have a sense of how 'blessed' you are? Can you recognise the 'blessedness' of others?
- Have there been occasions when you have had a sense of being filled with the Holy Spirit or a sense of the closeness of God?
- This week try to visit someone who is in need of some attention, especially as Christmas is almost upon us. Make the time to reach out to another.
- Have you ever felt honoured by a visit from someone special? Is there a favourite relative that you visit on a regular basis? Do you have special memories associated with your mother or grandmother? Share your reflections with others.
- Mary's great song of rejoicing, which comes after today's gospel, makes a suitable prayer this week:

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.
For he has looked upon my lowliness;
behold, from now on, all ages will call me blessed.
The Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.*

SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

Mary, the mother of God, has a unique and integral place in Christian tradition. Catholics honour her because she was chosen by God to give human form to his Son—a task she freely and willingly accepted. 'By her complete adherence to the Father's will, and to his Son's redemptive work ... the virgin Mary is the Church's model of faith and charity' (CCC, §967). There may be some lingering misunderstandings about the role of Mary within the Catholic tradition.

- It may be necessary to distinguish between the honour that is given to Mary and the worship and adoration that are due only to God.
• You could look at the Scripture texts about Mary and explore her role as model of faith and mother of the Church.
• You could introduce and explain some of the popular devotions to Mary that have developed over the centuries, such as the rosary.
• You could introduce some of the titles given to Mary over the centuries and explore their significance—for example, Mary Help of Christians. Under this title, Mary is a patron saint of Australia.
• You could explore some of the images of Mary that have been popularised through art or film. Do these images reflect the reality of a young Jewish mother in the first century? What do you think Mary was really like?

SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

It is Mary's willingness to accept her role in God's plan for salvation that makes her such a special figure. Throughout the Scriptures, God often chooses those who are lowly and apparently powerless to assist in his plan for salvation. Mary's simplicity and faith are a model for all believers. Her response to God's call is one we can all emulate.

LIVING THE WORD

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and environment

- What images of Mary are there in your parish church or other buildings? You could encourage the group to visit those images and discuss them. Are there particular Marian devotions held in your community? Are there ways the group can become involved in these?
• Use the Advent wreath and candle-lighting ritual again. Pray together the Hail Mary. You could give a gift of prayer cards featuring the Hail Mary. Encourage the group to learn this great prayer of the Church by heart. You could sing an arrangement of the Hail Mary (GA 544) or Magnificat (GA 550). Conclude with the prayer of exorcism in the RCIA at §94K.

NOTES

Dotted lines for taking notes.