

4th Sunday of Advent, Year B

GOSPEL

Jerusalem Bible © 1966 by Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd and Doubleday & Company Inc.

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, 'Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the house of Jacob forever and his reign will have no end.'

Mary said to the angel, 'But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?'

'The Holy Spirit will come upon you,' the angel answered, 'and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called the Son of God. Know this too: your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God.'

'I am the handmaid of the Lord', said Mary, 'let what you have said be done to me.' And the angel left her.

(Luke 1:26-38)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- This scene from the Gospel of Luke, where such a momentous exchange takes place, is known as the Annunciation, meaning the announcement of the conception of Jesus.
- From the time of the exile in Babylon, Israel had longed for the Messiah to come. He was to be the anointed one of God, and the prophets foretold that he would come from the House of David and be born in David's home town of Bethlehem.
- According to Luke's Gospel, Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth in the north and travel to Bethlehem to be counted in the census because Joseph is of David's line and must return to his 'home' country.

EXPLORING THE WORD

Annunciation stories are an established literary form. There are a number of such stories in the Hebrew Scriptures—for example, the births of Isaac, Samson and Samuel— and, of course, Luke has already recorded the annunciation of John the Baptist. The purpose of the annunciation story is to let the reader know what role the person whose birth is announced will play in salvation history. In this sense, they are a literary device rather than a strictly historical narrative, although clearly based on ancient memory.

In the annunciation of the birth of Jesus, however, there are elements that surpass all other annunciation stories. The emphasis is on the creative action of the Holy Spirit and on Mary's cooperation with God's will, and it establishes Jesus' transcendental origins. The role that the child to be born is to play in salvation history is defined in terms of Davidic messiahship, and on this last Sunday of Advent, we stand on the brink of the fulfillment of the promise made to Mary of messianic hope for the world. The tension of the waiting of Advent is almost over.

- Do you ever wonder why God has chosen you and set you on this journey of the catechumenate?
- Where do you think this journey will ultimately lead you?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- 'The power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow.' Do you feel this presence?
- Mary's perfect 'yes' to God's will establishes her as a model of discipleship. What are you called to say 'yes' to, to enable God to live within you?
- How are we called to practise discipleship in our world today?
- Recall an experience of receiving a total surprise—or perhaps a shock! Was it a welcome or unwelcome experience? How did you respond? Share your stories.
- The 'Hail Mary' is one of the best known prayers of the Church. It echoes the words of today's gospel.

*Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with you.
Blessed are you among women
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

Memorise this prayer and recite it often this week.

- Like Mary, who called on her elderly kinswoman when she was in need, call on someone this week who may be in need of company or support.

