

Advent IV
12/19/2021

MISSIONARY DISCIPLES

The story of the Visitation that we just heard is a lovely one. It is aptly called a joyful mystery. You can imagine the surprise and delight Elizabeth must have felt when Mary entered her home. Elizabeth was already blessed with finally being able to bear a child. Mary enters and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit as the infant John the Baptist leaps within her.

This is truly a beautiful story to ponder but when we consider it, we come to realize that there's much more. The Visitation has much to teach us. First of all, God is at work here. Old women and virgins aren't supposed to be having babies and yet now an old woman and a virgin are both with child. This isn't merely human activity. Human sterility gives way to divine fertility. The natural order to the supernatural order. Both women rejoice in the new life that they carry within themselves and in both cases these are, from the human side of things, unplanned pregnancies. The Visitation reminds us of the dignity of unborn human life.

Not only that, there's a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth declares to Mary, *Blessed are you among women and blessed the fruit of your womb*. Elizabeth goes on to acknowledge Mary as the Mother of her Lord and she then praises Mary for her great faith. In turn Mary will then break forth into a hymn of praise for all that God has done for her and the people of God.

Our own St. Therese had a great devotion to the Blessed Mother. She insisted that what Mary teaches us is practical virtues, practical virtues. The Blessed Mother shows us a deep faith, an intentional faith with her acceptance of God's call at the annunciation.

Not only that, Mary shows us faith and action. Faith: *Blessed are you who believed*. Action: She went off in haste. She not only shows us faith and action but faith *in* action. She is a daughter of Abraham in terms of physical descent, but she is also a daughter of Abraham in terms of her faith. At the Annunciation, she made a giant leap of faith with her yes to God and then she doesn't sit around but rather goes to see Elizabeth. Her faith propels her forward into action. St. James says that faith

without works is dead. Mary had a living faith and not only that she had a prompt faith. She went *in haste*. She acted.

In his epic work, *The Divine Comedy*, Dante describes a journey through hell, purgatory and heaven. Purgatory is a seven storey mountain that people ascend as they are purged from the seven deadly sins. On nearly every level, they are encouraged by an example of the opposite virtue with an illustration from the life of the Virgin Mary. On the terrace of sloth, those being cleansed are given the example of Mary who went *in haste*. When we're tempted to be lazy and or even to procrastinate, Mary gives us a model of being attentive and active.

Mary is also a marvelous example of missionary activity. She has received the word of God, the Word made flesh, into her heart and literally into her body. She now carries the word of God to others. A missionary is one who is sent, who is sent with a message. Mary as one who carried the word of God to others shows us love of neighbor and missionary activity.

The Church has been described as a community of disciples. Every Christian from the most newly baptized baby to the Pope are disciples. They have different roles to play within that community but they all remain disciples. Pope Francis takes this a step further step saying that Christians are to be missionary disciples. Disciples follow Jesus and missionary disciples not only follow Jesus but share Jesus.

When we think of missionaries, we think of those who are sent to foreign lands to share the gospel. And that's incredibly noble. All of us, each in our own way, are called to be missionary disciples at home, in our professional lives and everywhere.

Married couples have a mission to love, serve and minister to each other, helping each other in this life and helping to lead each other to eternal life. Parents are very important missionaries but in their case the motion is a little different. Rather than being sent somewhere God sends their mission, their children to them to lead them in the ways of Jesus. Those who are single and widowed are also called and sent to share the gospel their own way. The same holds true for those in consecrated life and Holy Orders. I am here at St. Therese because I have been sent

here by my bishop. This is my mission and one day I will be sent somewhere else.

As we prepare for Christmas, it's important to remember that the Visitation is more than a lovely story. Through it we're reminded of the important role of Mary in the story of salvation. We're reminded of the respect to be given to pre-born human life.

In the Visitation Mary shows herself to be a model for all disciples in terms of practical virtues. We too are called to receive the word of God into our hearts. We too are called to step out in intentional faith and in intentional action avoiding the temptation of laziness. We too are called to be part of a community of disciples we call the Church, to be missionary disciples, each of us in our own way, reflecting and sharing with others the life and love of God.

Informed by the word of God, nourished by the Eucharist, inspired by Mary's example and assisted by her prayers, may we always be faithful, missionary disciples of her Son and our Lord, Jesus Christ.