

Fourth Sunday of Advent

One of the joys of pastoral ministry is to take Holy Communion to those no longer able to get to Mass. We have the privilege of carrying the Lord hidden in the Sacrament of the Eucharist into the homes of those who want to be in communion with him.

What we have just read in our Gospel could be called the pastoral ministry that Mary was offering to her cousin Elizabeth. She too was carrying Jesus into the home of her aged cousin. She had gone “as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah.” When Mary entered the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth this became a moment of joy and revelation for both women. Elizabeth’s child leapt for joy. Filled with the Holy Spirit Elizabeth became a prophet of God. What was hidden was revealed. “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?”

Through those words of Elizabeth God reveals to us that Mary is carrying the Word of God made flesh for us. God has chosen to dwell among us. His presence is still hidden from human eyes but is seen through the eyes of faith of this holy woman Elizabeth. “Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.” Elizabeth is talking not just about her own faith but about the faith of Mary herself.

Elizabeth confirms for Mary that what God had promised her had been fulfilled. She is bearing the Christ Child.

In these few days before Christmas, Mary and Elizabeth help us to be ready for our encounter with the one born to save us and all humanity. They help us to see the unseen God who dwells in our midst.

Mary’s journey to Elizabeth would have taken her a week of vigorous walking. She made her journey in response to what the angel had said to her. We might not hear any angels speaking to us, but God uses many different people to speak to us. God speaks to us especially through those around us who are in need. It is so often that in responding to a need that we discover where God is. God reveals himself in us and in the people who need our care.

As we wrap up our Christmas presents maybe we could use the very action of wrapping as a prayerful meditation about the one to whom we are giving the present. We could pray that they would be wrapped in the love that God has for them. As we measure out the paper that we need to use, we could pray that they would come to know something of the immeasurable love that God has for them. When our wrapping is complete, and we think about the gift hidden beneath it, we could pray that the

hidden God within the person to whom we are giving the gift might be seen more clearly by us.

The many Christmas cards that we have received and now display, can also lead us into prayer. Maybe we could take some time over the next few days to read again what is on those cards. This time allow the cards to speak to us not just from the people who sent them, but also from the one whose birthday we are celebrating. Imagine the Lord Jesus speaking to us in the words of those cards. He wants us to experience the joy of his birth. He wants us to know that he has come as our Emmanuel, the God who remains always with us. He wants to fill us with hope as we begin a New Year. The hidden God carried by Mary can reveal himself in those many Christmas cards that we have received.

Fr. John takes great care to decorate our Christmas tree at home with lights He has also put up new Christmas lights in our front garden. Wherever we see Christmas lights may we allow them to say something to us about the child Jesus who came to scatter the darkness and bring light to our world. As the lights change colour perhaps we could think of the many different ways that Jesus shares his light and life with us.

As we are preparing food for Christmas, we could use that as a time for prayer and reflection too. We want to

express our hospitality. We bring out the best of things to share with our family and friends. We prepare more than is needed. In all that, we are imitating our God. He is the one who invites us to celebrate his son's birth. He sends out his invitation for us to gather around the table of the Eucharist. He offers us the greatest gift that anyone could give to us. Our God always prepares more than we need. Our God is an extravagant God. Maybe we could be thinking about that God as we prepare the Christmas meals for our family.

Today's gospel tells the story of two human people meeting in an act of friendship and love. God used that meeting as a time to speak to us all of something quite marvelous. It became a sacrament of God's presence among us. May the simple human things that we do to celebrate Christmas become sacraments of God's presence among us. May we recognise the presence of the God of love in the simple things that we do for one another.