

4th Sunday of Advent (B)

24th December 2023

'Touching Christ, through Mary'

2Sam 7: *I will preserve the offspring of your body after you ...* Ps 88: *I will establish your dynasty for ever for endless ages ...*
Rom 16: *the revelation of a mystery kept secret*
Lk 1:26–38: *the annunciation.*



When we come to this 4th and last Sunday of Advent, each year, it's a time *to be with Mary*, Our Blessed Lady. Along with St Joseph her husband, Mary is the main figure of this last stretch of Advent. To me, it's a time to turn to her in deep reverence and devotion, for she

it is that carries us that last distance to Christmas. Without her response, without her love, there is no Christmas. She expresses in her actions her love for God, her love for Joseph, her love for her Jewish race, her love for all humanity. And we would do very well to be close to our blessed Mother this Sunday, as we prepare to enter in to Christmas Day. No-one is better suited to bring us close to Jesus than His very own mother, Mary.

We have all heard that Gospel account of the Annunciation many times before — it's very familiar to us! And yet the beauty of its message to us is irreplaceable, isn't it? It's a passage that we should never tire of hearing and meditating on. Mary's faithful love for God, as a devout Jewess, is manifest. Despite the surprise of this supreme calling, and despite the extraordinary fact that Our Lord, the Son of God Himself, will be a baby conceived outside the normal nature of things, yet she says, 'Yes' ... "*Be it done unto me according to Thy word.*" Her love for God generates such firm trust in Him, that she is able to say 'yes' ... and not just for herself, but for all Israel who had gone before her, and for all humanity of all times! She has faith for us all!

Hence the picture that's in front of us at the foot of the altar at Mass today. Mary is shown comforting our ancient ancestor, Eve, the "*mother of all the living*" — the first human woman. And Eve is shown with one hand clutching the forbidden fruit, the sin of grasping pride that led to our downfall, and with the other reaching out

tenderly to Jesus, “*the fruit of the womb*” of Mary. The Church has long contrasted the original sin — the ‘no’ of Eve and Adam, which has brought such misery and death — with the faithful ‘yes’ of Mary, which allowed God to bring about His salvation in Christ. In fact, the Fathers of the Church would make much of the simple reversal of the Latin word *Eva* (Eve) into the word *Ave* (‘Hail,’ as in “Hail, Mary, full of grace.”) Mary’s positive human response to God undoes all the depressing negativity that sin has introduced into the world. No wonder Eve is so comforted by Our Lady, and by the sight of her pregnancy with the long-awaited, much-needed, unborn Saviour, Jesus. All humanity, descended from Eve looks to Mary to be the one to start saying that perfect ‘yes’ to God’s plan, and to conceive Jesus in her womb — the one who is to save His people from their sins.

There is an astonishing passage in a sermon by St Bernard of Clairvaux, a 12th-c. Cistercian monk from France who was a great Marian theologian, and who penned many homilies on Our Lady. In his sermon on the

Annunciation, he writes movingly, addressing Our Lady directly, expressing the tense moment of expectation as the whole world awaits with bated breath her crucial response to the angel’s extraordinary request from God:

“The angel is waiting for your answer: it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for the word of pity, even we who are overwhelmed in wretchedness by the sentence of damnation. ... By one little word of yours in answer shall we all be made alive.

Adam asks this of you, loving Virgin, poor Adam exiled as he is from paradise with all his poor wretched children; Abraham begs this of you, and David; this, all the holy fathers implore, even your fathers who themselves are dwelling in the valley of the shadow of death; this, the whole world is waiting for, kneeling at your feet. ...

Answer, O Virgin, answer the angel speedily; rather, through the angel answer your Lord. Speak the word, and receive the Word; offer what is yours, and conceive what is of God; give what is temporal, and embrace what is eternal. Why delay? Why tremble? Believe, speak receive! ... Open, O Blessed Virgin, your heart to faith; open your lips to speak; open your bosom to your Maker. (Hom 4, 8–9)

Indeed, that moment of the Annunciation to Mary is a history-changing moment that St Bernard describes to brilliantly dramatic effect. Yes, it lay in Mary's awesome moment of choice, either to co-operate with God, and undo the pride of sinful humanity; or to take the easy, lazy, selfish option of rejecting that hitherto unheard-of mission.

We, with all humanity, then, join Eve in reaching out to Jesus who is to be born from Mary. We reach out to Mary, our immaculate and heavenly Mother, who is mother of all the redeemed, because she brings us unfailingly to Jesus. It is never true to say that honour given to the Mother of Christ distracts us from her Son. True devotion to Mary leads us closer to Christ, since she always points to Him; she serves Him, and she co-operates with Him in His divine mission to save humanity. Humanly, of course, Mary's rôle was none too easy. We may picture her as a saint, the model of serenity, but in point of fact her life was full of intense challenges and suffering. As a wife and as a mother, as a homemaker and as a charitable relative, as a disciple and as a bereaved mother, she gave her all to

Christ ... She gave her whole life. Travelling on that road to Bethlehem — whether by donkey or otherwise — sums up her immense human effort for Jesus. She walks alongside, us, then, on the road of life: she knows what it means to walk the hard road of suffering as a Christian. But she also knows that Jesus is all that really matters. She urges us to take that road of discipleship with her. She will help us at every moment if we let her keep us close to the Lord by imploring her prayers.

On this final day before the Christmas celebrations, let's reach out to Mary, like Eve, to pay homage to the "fruit of her womb, Jesus":

Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. The Lord is *truly* with thee, Mary, and we need you with us to stay faithful — we need your motherly touch, and your maternal prayers.

Pray for us, sinners. Pray constantly for us, that we may be better and more loving Christians every day. Pray for us, that though sinners we may bring Christ to our families and to the world around us this Christmas, as you did from that first Christmas.