

4th Sunday of Advent (C)

19th December 2024

'Loving the Mother — loving the unborn child'

Mic 5: *the time when she who is to give birth gives birth ...* Ps 79: *visit this vine and protect it!* Heb 10: *you prepared a body for me ...*

Lk 1: 39–44: *blessed is she who believed the promise made her by the Lord ...*

Finally, after the previous Advent Sundays of *remoter* preparation for Christmas — through the message of prophets like Isaiah (Jeremiah / Baruch / Zephaniah), and through the arresting witness of final prophet, and first Christian saint, John the Baptist — we now come to the more familiar territory of Mary & Joseph and her unborn child (even *Bethlehem* gets a prophetic mention in Micah), and prior to that, Elizabeth & Zechariah and their own unborn child. The fourth Sunday brings us to the brink of Christmas, but it's not an easy little saccharine, 'fairy-tale' ride: we're urged to consider some *epic journeys* that preceded the birth of the Saviour ... a series of *pilgrimages*, holy journeys as it were, "in accordance with the Scriptures."

We ourselves might still be facing our own journeys for Christmas. Those of us who don't have to get *flights* for Christmas are, at least, spared the worries of getting to

the airport on time, or of airplane cancellations; but, still, there is the risk of *trains* not running to time, and the like; but thankfully this year the weather isn't too inclement — sometimes we're worrying about snow and ice as well, and whether we can make any journeys at all! My sister and her family will be coming down from the north on Christmas Eve, I hope, in order to be with us in St Albans for the day — let's hope she, and all of you still to travel for Christmas, can do so without fret. (BTW, for those of you *not* travelling: Newman House remains open for Christmas Day! — Christmas Mass 10.30am — and if you would otherwise be on your own, please let me know after Mass, and I'll add you to the list for Christmas lunch after Mass here at NH.)

The challenges of family travel, of course, did not begin in recent times! As I said, even that first Christmas had its own strenuous journeys. Sometimes we might surround the account of the nativity with all sorts of sweet, childlike, fairy-tale feelings, or focus on the event only as a spiritual experience, that we forget the reality of the great

physical effort involved in those nine months of Mary's pregnancy: she chose to make not one, but two, long and arduous journeys:

- i. No sooner has the teenaged Mary agreed to the angel Gabriel's unusual and unsettling request to bear the Son of God than she hurries off to be with her much older relation Elizabeth now in her own late pregnancy, in the hill country of Judah. Mary is not so caught up in her own blessed vocation that she neglects her cousin. But it's not just a matter of domestic help. Of course, for Mary it was a chance to be away from her home village when her pregnancy was out of the ordinary course of events: her child was not Joseph's, for the Father was God Himself. And it's a truly religious moment for these two mothers, encouraging each other in their unforeseen roles. God's plan had begun to unfold and was taking in their two lives, and would dominate even more the lives of their sons. No wonder these two women came together to support

each other in their new situations ... no doubt to talk about the very meaning of these miraculous occurrences: quite what was it that their sons were being called on to do? But even with all her humility, taking to the road for a four-day journey to her cousin's, it's very clear that Mary is the greater of these two women. The unborn baby John the Baptist responds joyfully to being in the presence of the unborn Christ child, and Elizabeth herself rejoices when she realises the tremendous nature of what is going on. She praises Mary for the fact that she is blessed through the holiness of her child Jesus; but more fundamentally she is blessed because she "*believed the promise made her by the Lord.*" We want to be like Elizabeth on this last Sunday of Advent, comforted and strengthened by the presence of the Blessed Virgin. Being close to Our Lady at this point in Advent we can know that we are close to Our Lord too. We welcome this distinctly *feminine* influence in our lives of the

mother of Our Lord, because we recognise why Mary was blessed: by her faith in God and by her Son of God; and we are so in need of both, her faith and her Son.

- ii. The second journey we think of, today, is that later and *even more arduous journey* undertaken by Mary, the one in those last weeks, the journey to Bethlehem. There she was, just days from giving birth, and needing to travel the long and uncomfortable road from Nazareth to Bethlehem, donkey or no donkey. This was Mary's Advent, awaiting the physical birth of her Son: and as the Preface says, "*the Virgin mother longed for Him with love beyond all telling.*" Again, we want to be with her today in that, sharing with her the joys and trepidation of imminent birth. Mary is closer to Christ than any of us: she gave her flesh to Him in the womb. It's important to be clear about this. Jesus, the Son of God, came in real flesh and blood, drawn from a human person of flesh and blood,

Mary. And therefore she is humanly related to Him, the closest of all humanity to Him. No wonder we honour her! Closeness to Mary always ensures intimacy with Christ her Son, for she always leads us on to Him, steps aside for Him, holds Him up for us to worship Him.

"*You are the highest honour of our race,*" we say of Mary, acknowledging her unique place in our affection. But it is not all based on her physical relationship to Jesus. If she had not also believed with a heart full of love for God, then what would have given her the strength of spirit to say yes to God's audacious plan in the first place, let alone to take on her life's difficult journey(s)? — to Elizabeth, to Bethlehem, ... eventually to Calvary. Mary is no delicate flower; alongside her incomparable holiness she was a fit young lady ready to undertake the great labours which came her way. But above all, she is *a mother who nurtures faith* — a mother to us all — representing the irreplaceable feminine side to our faith which God intended: that He

would give glory to women and motherhood in the birth of His only Son.

I think that today is also *a day to honour St Joseph*, isn't it? To turn to St Joseph is very fitting: that amazing man and husband who is *an inspiration to all husbands*; he who loved Mary so thoroughly as to care for her in her unique role as mother of the divine Son. That latter journey which they undertook together emphasizes the tenderness and the strength of his love for her, standing by her in the protection of Jesus. And when it comes to the protection of that unborn Jesus, we too can be inspired to hold firm, with the prayers of Mary and Joseph, to the protection of all unborn children, which in today's society are threatened every day in the hospitals and clinics of our country.

The buoyant love which Joseph had for Mary; which Mary had for God; which they each had for the unborn Jesus: these point to the heart of what Christmas should bring to us this week ... an expression of family love; and an expression of love, as families and individuals — and as

a Chaplaincy community — *for Jesus*, at its heart. Mary and Joseph lead us in that journey of faith. Despite being just a poor couple from out-of-the-way 1st-c. Nazareth, they show that *God's love can burn very brightly in the hearts of believers* ... And they light up beautifully and inspiringly this beginning of our Christmas week.