

## 4<sup>th</sup> Week of Advent - 20 December 2009

When I was in the seminary, as part of my training I got to travel to the Holy Land with my fellow classmates, and see for myself many of the places that are mentioned in the Bible. For a good part of the trip, we stayed in a small town on the outskirts of Jerusalem called Ein-Karem. Now Ein-Karem has a special significance of its own. This is the town that is believed to be where Elizabeth and Zachariah lived. Therefore, this is also the town where St. John the Baptist was born and raised. Because of this, there are two Christian churches in Ein-Karem. One is the church of St. John the Baptist, and this church marks the spot where St. John the Baptist was born. The second church is called, the Church of the Visitation, and of course this church marks the spot where Elizabeth greets Mary, as in today's gospel story.

One of the things that I remember about the Church of the Visitation is that it is located on a rather steep hill. It was not an easy walk to get there. And to think that Mary traveled all that way from Nazareth to Ein-Karem. I mean that is pretty close to 70 miles. It would have taken her a few days to get there over some rather rough terrain.

Therefore, when I was there praying in the church, I had to ask myself, why did she do that? Especially after she just found out that she was to be the mother of the Messiah. I mean, most people, when they receive news that greatly impacts their life, they busy themselves by preparing for it, they dwell on it, they get all caught up in it, they are consumed by it. But that is not what Mary is about. Mary instead, understands that her cousin who in her old age is with child is in need of help and then goes to help her out. That made me think, how often are we tempted to dwell on our own problems, our own lives, our own ambitions, without giving much thought to the people around us?

Another thing that struck me is that when Mary set out on this long journey, she didn't have any hard core proof that her cousin Elizabeth was with child, all that she had to go on was the message of an angel. Yet that was enough for Mary. She placed all her faith and trust in God's Word. Thus, when Elizabeth greeted Mary, she said to her: "Blessed are you because you have believed." And this statement is so true, not only for Mary, but for anyone who believes in God's Word. We are all blessed when we hear God's Word and accept it into our hearts, placing all our faith in it. We are all blessed when we hear God's Word and act on it.

And not only that, but think about it, who is the Word? Jesus Christ is the Word. Therefore, when we believe in God's Word, we believe in Jesus Christ. And why are we blessed when we believe in Jesus, the Word made flesh? Because its the truth, and the truth is this: That God sent His Son into the world to save us because he loves us. As a result, our lives inherently have dignity, meaning and infinite value, because this is the value that God has assigned to our lives. That outlook on life is such a positive blessing when you compare it to what the alternative viewpoints would be; that God doesn't love us or that there is no God and therefore there is no special, inherent value that we as human beings have. When it comes down to it, one viewpoint fills you with joy, the other leaves you depressed. One viewpoint leads you to act out of care and concern for your fellow man because of each individual's inherent dignity, the other does not. Truly we are blessed when we believe in the Word made flesh.

Another thing that came to mind when I was there at the Church of the Visitation is Elizabeth's reaction when she greeted Mary. Elizabeth says: "Blessed are you among

women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Certainly there is much truth to this statement – to be carrying the Son of God inside of oneself is a great blessing beyond compare and a great honor indeed.

And so it is very important that we recognize and appreciate that because every time we come to Mass and receive the Eucharist, we too have Jesus inside of us, we too are blessed. It is so easy to take that for granted, because we don’t often stop to think about what we are doing. But if we clearly understood how privileged we are to participate in the Mass and receive Jesus in the Eucharist, it would change our lives, and we would be overwhelmed with the love of God.

Think about what Mary did when she conceived Jesus in her womb. She didn’t center on herself and say, “Why me?” Instead, she went to Elizabeth’s home to help her and be of service to her.

Again, that is what we are supposed to be inspired to do when we receive Jesus inside of us, we are to go out and be of service to our fellow man. And when Elizabeth says, “And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” She recognized the Lord in Mary, and was filled with great joy because of it. Do we recognize Jesus in the people that we meet? Do we see the value and respect that we owe others? Do we recognize the Lord in the Eucharist, and do we recognize the Lord in the Church?

At Christmas time we celebrate the fact that Jesus, the Son of God has come into the world. But if we are going to let Jesus come into our lives, then we need to allow these mysteries, like the one we celebrate today, to penetrate our hearts. These stories truly have deep meaning for us which is why it is so important for us to internalize it and make it our own so that we may truly understand and live out the mystery of our faith.

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