

19 DECEMBER 2021

Sunday Message

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE WORD

Year C • Psalter Week 4

HAIL MARY, FILLED WITH GRACE!

(LUKE 1:39-45)



Fresco at the Sanctuary of the Visitation in Ein Kerem, Israel, depicting Mary's meeting with Elizabeth

The first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke are a highly artistically constructed series of five scenes (this excludes the later one of the finding of the child Jesus in the Temple) and the central event is the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, both pregnant, with Jesus and John the Baptist respectively.

The reason for Mary's visit to her cousin is not, as often supposed, out of concern for her welfare or an act of kindness or charity, but rather is part of the stereotyped account of the annunciation of the birth of a significant person in the divine plan. The final and sixth element in the narrative is the giving of a sign. In this context, the sign is the confirmation of the divine or angelic word: it is an assurance that the person receiving the message has not dreamed or imagined it. Thus, Elizabeth's being pregnant is the sign to Mary that Gabriel's communication was genuine. Mary's visit is to confirm that she has understood correctly her experience with God's messenger. This is the only scene in which the two mothers meet: the unborn John the Baptist gives testimony to the arrival of the child Jesus, just as later he will proclaim the coming of the Messiah. Elizabeth hails the arrival of "the mother of my Lord" and her words have passed into the Christian tradition as part of the most common and popular prayer to Mary. ■

DO

Set out the figure of the shepherd from your crib set; reflect during the week on how seemingly ordinary people received news of the birth of the Messiah rather than official and educated individuals.



LEARN

The point of Mary's visit to Elizabeth is to confirm Gabriel's message at the annunciation.

In biblical annunciation narratives, a sign is always given to assure the recipient that they have not imagined or dreamed their experience.

People who demand signs as proof are condemned: this is not the same as individuals, such as Mary, checking out signs that they have been given by the divine messenger.

SAY

Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.

(see Luke 1:28. 42)

REFLECT

The scene of the visitation is the central occasion of Luke's Infancy Narrative, the first two chapters of his Gospel. It brings together the two mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, and their unborn children, John and Jesus. After this, they diverge and we are given the accounts of the birth of the two children. Always, Luke presents Jesus as superior to the Baptist. Elizabeth is cast in the mould of the mothers of important figures in Jewish tradition who are unable, for some unspecified reason, to conceive naturally, but by divine intervention are able eventually to give birth. Mary's virginal conception is of a different order: this to insist that Jesus is the Son of God and has no human father.

It is important to remember that the Gospels are theological documents: they are expressions of faith. While we might be inclined to see events such as the visitation in terms of human sympathy, there is much more at work, much more depth to figures such as Elizabeth and Mary than a surface reading of the text might suggest.

It is worth reflecting on Elizabeth's final words to Mary: "Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled." In the Bible, the verb "to believe" can be understood as "to trust". Perhaps if we thought more about trusting God rather than simply believing in God, we might be closer to the attitude of Mary and Elizabeth and to that of Joseph and Zechariah. Luke is always emphasising the need to listen to the word. ■

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

Drop down dew from above, you heavens,
and let the clouds rain down the Just One;
let the earth be opened and bring forth a
Saviour.

COLLECT

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord,
your grace into our hearts,
that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ
your Son
was made known by the message of an Angel,
may by his Passion and Cross
be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of
the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

FIRST READING

Micah 5:1-4

A reading from the prophet Micah.

The Lord says this:

You, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
the least of the clans of Judah,
out of you will be born for me
the one who is to rule over Israel;
his origin goes back to the distant past,
to the days of old.
The Lord is therefore going to abandon them
till the time when she who is to give birth
gives birth.
Then the remnant of his brothers will come
back
to the sons of Israel.
He will stand and feed his flock
with the power of the Lord,
with the majesty of the name of his God.
They will live secure, for from then on he
will extend his power
to the ends of the land.
He himself will be peace.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

PSALM

Psalm 79

Response:

God of hosts, bring us back;
let your face shine on us and we shall be
saved.

1. O shepherd of Israel, hear us,
shine forth from your cherubim throne.
O Lord, rouse up your might,
O Lord, come to our help. (R.)
2. God of hosts, turn again, we implore,
look down from heaven and see.
Visit this vine and protect it,
the vine your right hand has planted. (R.)
3. May your hand be on the man you have
chosen,
the man you have given your strength.
And we shall never forsake you again:
give us life that we may call upon your
name. (R.)

SECOND READING

Hebrews 10:5-10

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews.

This is what Christ said, on coming into the
world:

You who wanted no sacrifice or oblation,
prepared a body for me.

You took no pleasure in holocausts or
sacrifices for sin:
then I said,
just as I was commanded in the scroll of the
book,
"God, here I am! I am coming to obey your
will."

Notice that he says first: You did not want
what the Law lays down as the things to be
offered, that is: the sacrifices, the oblations,
the holocausts and the sacrifices for sin, and
you took no pleasure in them; and then he
says: Here I am! I am coming to obey your
will. He is abolishing the first sort to replace
it with the second. And this will was for us
to be made holy by the offering of his body
made once and for all by Jesus Christ.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!

I am the handmaid of the Lord:
let what you have said be done to me.
Alleluia!

GOSPEL

Luke 1:39-45

A reading from the holy Gospel according to
Luke.

Mary set out and went as quickly as she
could to a town in the hill country of Judah.
She went into Zechariah's house and greeted
Elizabeth. Now as soon as Elizabeth heard
Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb
and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.
She gave a loud cry and said, "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? For the moment your greeting reached
my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy.
Yes, blessed is she who believed that the
promise made her by the Lord would be
fulfilled."

The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

PROFESSION OF FAITH

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.
I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with
the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
(all bow during the next three lines)
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the
Virgin Mary,
and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under
Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord,
the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is adored
and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
I believe in one, holy, catholic and
apostolic Church.
I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness
of sins
and I look forward to the resurrection of the
dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

PRAYER OVER THE OFFERINGS

May the Holy Spirit, O Lord,
sanctify these gifts laid upon your altar,
just as he filled with his power the womb of
the Blessed Virgin Mary.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

Behold, a Virgin shall conceive and bear a
son;
and his name will be called Emmanuel.

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

Having received this pledge of eternal
redemption,
we pray, almighty God,
that, as the feast day of our salvation draws
ever nearer,
so we may press forward all the more eagerly
to the worthy celebration of the mystery of
your Son's Nativity.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

Father, Ruler of the Universe,
from the very beginning of time
you have shown your love for us,
and most of all when you sent your Son as
our Saviour.
Bless all who look upon this crib.
May it remind us of the humble birth of
Jesus,
and raise our thoughts to him,
who is God-with-us and our Saviour
who lives and reigns forever and ever.
Amen.

Blessing of Crib