

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent (B)

21<sup>st</sup> December 2014

'If walls had ears'

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

Why, you might ask, have I chosen to read the Gospel today in a different translation? What difference does it make? I did so because the passage recounting the Annunciation to Our Lady is a Gospel text that I know really well. In the version that we usually have at Mass, I could probably recite it with my eyes closed! So, partly so that I have to read the words more carefully, and therefore that they sink in to my mind more fully, I chose to use the other translation authorized for use at Mass.

Another reason is that this is the version I read last year in November when I was in Nazareth. I had the joy of proclaiming the Gospel at Mass, there in the Basilica of the Annunciation ... and this was the text supplied on that occasion. I remember thinking how nice it was to read out loud a different translation of the words. They 'came alive' for me there ... There, where they referred to, the place of Our Lady's home, Nazareth. The basilica stands above the remains of a cave which is believed to have been the rear portion of the very house of Our Lady. In that grotto are written the words, "And the Word was made flesh ... HERE." Here! This is where the

Incarnation happened. Our Lady said 'yes,' and God acted on her acceptance: the Son of God entered into her womb as a frail, tiny, unborn child, Jesus.

This year I was able to see the other part of her house. As I said, the rear part was just a cave set into the rock-face; but the forward part was brick-built. And those bricks, those walls, are no longer in Nazareth, but in Italy, in a beautiful spot not far from the Adriatic Sea, called Loreto. By whatever means, miraculous or near-miraculous, in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. as the Christian crusaders were finally expelled from the Holy Land by Muslim invaders, the stones of the Holy House, the front part of Our Lady's dwelling, were transported to Loreto and rebuilt into the house. Archaeologically the stones there in Loreto are fashioned according to the style of 1<sup>st</sup>-c. Palestine! I had the joy of celebrating Mass there in Loreto basilica three days in a row, including one early morning in the Holy House itself, concelebrating with the Archbishop of Loreto. The people were packed in to this house for Mass: no seats, everyone just had to stand throughout ... truly a domestic little church, the walls that, if tradition is correct, were the walls that Mary knew.

They say, don't they, "If the walls had ears ...!" If those walls in Loreto had ears, what did they hear? They heard, no

doubt, the dialogue of Our Lady with God's angelic messenger. They witnessed, at least, that moment of history when simple, but saintly, Mary, teenaged Jewish girl of Nazareth, turned back the tide of centuries of sin. She, by the simple, trusting, selfless, faith-filled 'yes' — "Let it be to me according to your word" — started to undo the sins begun by Adam and Eve, sins of pride and selfishness. By her co-operation, God could work out His plan to take on flesh and live and die in this sinful world, for us. To be in Nazareth, and to be in Loreto, is to be able to say truly, that "the Word was made flesh ... HERE!" Here, it really happened. Mary said her little 'yes' to God; and God spoke His big 'Yes!' to us.

We recall this glory of Mary every single time we say the 'Hail Mary' — "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." She has by her faith, allowed God to turn the tide, so that Jesus could enter this world. How could anything be more glorious, exciting, or powerful in all this world? This Gospel passage, today, then, is one of the most important, and it's why I want to be able to savour its meaning, and not just skim over the words, read countless times before. Mary is there for us, this Advent, as we approach Christmas. Mary, with Joseph by her side, to guide us towards our own Bethlehem this Christmas. Let's be

sure to take their path to Christmas, not the one the shops would have us take, some sort of frenzy of buying! Let's be guided by their simplicity, faith, and perseverance — the Christ-child, coming to be born, at the heart of their concerns. Baby Jesus, God made man, coming to our aid in our desperate need; this is who Mary and Joseph lead us to acknowledge and adore.

I saw an online charity advert, today, which simply said: "God was born in a stable as humble as this Iraqi refugee tent." And of course it is true. Jesus was born in poverty, to Joseph and Mary on the move, struggling with nowhere to lay their head. We have a right to celebrate Christmas, but we have no right to forget the circumstances of the Nativity or to spend so extravagantly that we have nothing left over to give to those in need this Christmas.

We have every chance, in these days ahead, to be powerful witnesses to Jesus Christ. The simple fact of ensuring 100% that we are present at Mass on Christmas Night or Christmas Day, can speak volumes, especially if we have family that are lukewarm or quite unbelieving. Nothing is more important than being with Jesus Himself, the one born for us, and showing the world that the 'Word made Flesh' is also HERE, here at Mass, here in the Church, here for us every day.