

4th Sunday of Advent (C)

20th December 2015

'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 ...

There have been days this week that have been so mild that I have struggled at some points to not be too warm! It's a bizarre thing to be saying in the last few days of December, isn't it? Sometimes at this time of year we're struggling with snow, and getting anxious about our travel plans for Christmas. Let's hope that this year the weather remains mild for us, as we so want to be with loved ones at this feast of Christmas, and that the travel won't be too treacherous or frustrating. 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.

The challenges of family travel, of course, did not begin in recent times! Even that first Christmas had its own strenuous journeys. Sometimes we might surround the story of the nativity with all sorts of sweet childlike fairytale feelings, or think of the event only as a spiritual experience, that we forget the reality that there was a lot of

real physical effort in those nine months of Mary's pregnancy. And in her months of pregnancy she chose to make not one, but two long journeys.

(a) 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. 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 the end Advent we can know that we are close to Our Lord too. We welcome this devoutly 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 in need of both, her faith and her Son.

(b) 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. 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. 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 take on her life’s difficult journey? 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.

It’s also a day to honour St Joseph, isn’t it? 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 just 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 of this parish, for Jesus at its heart. Mary and Joseph lead us in that journey of faith. Despite just being a poor couple from 1st-c. Nazareth, they show that God’s love can burn very brightly in the hearts of believers ... And they light up beautifully this beginning of our Christmas week.