

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

23<sup>rd</sup> December 2018

‘Scripture IV: Gospels’

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 ...

On this last Advent Sunday, I want to consider the 4<sup>th</sup> and final part of the Scriptures that we hear each and every Sunday at Mass, namely, the Gospels. The way we proclaim the Gospel at Mass highlights its importance for us as the centrepiece of the Liturgy of the Word: we stand; we precede it by a special acclamation, usually ‘Alleluia!'; we often carry candles to accompany it, and incense the Gospel book too; and at times it is not read but chanted (sung). Its significance stems from the fact that the Gospels record and relate the very actions and words of our Blessed Saviour; for this reason we afford it this added dignity. The Liturgy of the Word each Sunday is usually built around the choice of the Gospel text; and for much of the year (in ‘Ordinary Time’) the Gospel is read systematically in a semi-continuous way from week to week, proceeding from chapter to chapter.

As I said last week, the Gospels aren't the oldest

writing in the NT; St Paul's letters are earlier, from the 50s and 60s of the 1<sup>st</sup> c. The written Gospel texts come instead from the late 1<sup>st</sup> c., about 40–60yrs after Jesus's ministry, but in the interim the Gospel had been preached by word of mouth, by the Apostles and their immediate collaborators, passing on the tradition of Jesus's life and teaching. It's not clear quite which of the 4 Gospel texts came first, though there's a strong tradition that Matthew in a Hebrew version that no longer exists was the original. Matthew, Mark and Luke in the Greek borrow a lot from each other, having been written down roughly in the years 70–85AD. In fact, many passages in these three Gospels are identical, often word-for-word. John, however, is completely different, not using the words of the other three at all, and probably written down later, 90–100AD, and this would tie in with the tradition that John the Apostle was a very young man at the time of Jesus's ministry, and died an old man. The 4 Gospels agree on who Jesus is, and paint a very similar picture of Him, even though each one chooses to leave in, or leave out, certain details or events. Yet this would be true

of any set of biographies written about anyone — they will differ in details, in the ordering of events, of what seemed important to one writer as opposed to another. But the joy of having the 4 Gospels is the variety of texts, teachings, parables, approach which Matthew, Mark Luke and John give us about Our Lord.

St Luke, whose Gospel we are reading in the Year ‘C’ of the lectionary, has an emphasis on the mercy of God, and on the attention that Jesus gave to the poor and marginalized ... For example, it’s Luke and only Luke that records the visit of the hill-dwelling shepherds to the newborn Christ: representatives of the outcast of humanity coming first to worship Him. And St Luke, too, offers us the greatest insights into Our Lady: it’s only in the infancy narratives of Luke 1–2 that we get the events that preceded Jesus’s birth as told from Mary’s perspective, such as the Annunciation and — today’s passage — the Visitation.

When we hear this Gospel event, today we see such a beautiful occasion, involving the two mothers, Mary & Elizabeth, and the two unborn children, Our Lord Jesus and

St John the Baptist. We see that it is because of Jesus’s divine presence in Mary’s womb that this moment is so filled with grace. When Our Lady announces her presence to her cousin Elizabeth, St John the Baptist leaps for joy in the womb of Elizabeth, and his mother is filled with the Holy Spirit. We get a sense here of what it should mean to be in the presence of Jesus through hearing the word. In fact if we are attuned, as Elizabeth was, to the working of God, and to His divine presence in the world, then when we hear the Gospel we should also leap for joy, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. We need to acknowledge that the subject of these Gospel texts is the divine Son of God; then when we stand attentively to hear the Gospel read to us, we will listen up, take note, be moved to obey and follow Him more lovingly. Let’s imagine ourselves, every time we are standing at Mass hearing the Gospel, that we are like Elizabeth, hearing Mary speak, for within these Gospel pages, just as within Mary, is the divine Son of God. When the Church proclaims these sacred words, then we should recognise the Lord in them, and know that He is near.