

Homily. 4th Sunday of Advent. Year. C. 22/23 December 2018.

St. Luke tells us that the Angel Gabriel visited the young virgin Mary when she was living in the Galilee township of Nazareth. Having received Mary's 'Yes' to what God planned and wanted for her, and through her co-operation for us all, the Angel left her. Now conceived by God's action, carrying within the child who would be named Jesus, a name which means 'God Saves', Mary embarked on the journey to her cousin and kinswoman Elizabeth. She'd learnt of her pregnancy from the Angels message. The gospel relates the story of this visitation of Mary.

We have to understand that this wasn't an easy trip to make. It's a distance of some 144 kilometres along rough dirt roads and tracks, unlit and dangerous at night, from Galilean hills down into valleys along the Jordan River and finally up again into hilly areas of Judaea. This journey had to be made mostly by foot and without conveniences such as Motels or Inns. It could only be negotiated if one travelled with a group, a sort of caravan.

We're not informed about how Mary handled these problems, only that she did so successfully, such was her desire to take this trip. No doubt, Mary went to this trouble and risk because she wanted to be with Elizabeth supporting her during her unexpected and unusual pregnancy. No doubt, too, she wanted to talk with her relative about what had come to pass in her own life, learning from the older woman's experience. Left alone by the Angel Mary did the smart thing; she sought out company she could trust, a mutually beneficial arrangement for her and Elizabeth.

We know from St. Luke that Mary stayed about 3 months before returning north to Nazareth, time enough for the child John to be born and for her to get back home before her own pregnancy became too advanced.

This gospel is all about visits; that of the Angel to Mary and Mary to Elizabeth, and about the journey from far flung Galilee to the area near Jerusalem and back again. Mary's story is given to us at time when many of us are going off visiting our families and friends or being visited by them, often as not making contact with each other only at this special time of year. It reminds us that though our connections are scatted across the city, the country and even around the globe, they matter very much because people and our relationships with them matter, giving meaning to the passing of our years, telling us that we're not alone in life.

Our hope is that these days and weeks, those many cards, letters, gifts and visitations will be happy, renewing bonds and uniting us with the flow of time. We don't want strained or stressed encounters, so much good will, kindness and understanding is needed by us all. Most of all though, we look to see the presence of God in what has happened to others and to ourselves over the last 12 months. We're seeking, in the stories told and the events that have happened, to find Christ alive and active with us and for us all, in the joys and success, as well and perhaps especially, in the sorrows and sadnesses. Nor can we ever forget those who feel so alone at this time, grieving their losses. Instead, we remember them throwing out a life-line of contact and connectedness however we can.

Everything in our experience of these days ought ready us for what we'll be celebrating here on Monday evening and Tuesday morning, the great life-line thrown out to us all by God in the birth of our Lord. He's the Son of God and the Son of Mary, the Prince of Peace and the splendour of God revealed to us in the flesh. In the words of our Advent/Christmas prayer, it's He who makes us into bread and peace for this world hungering for meaning and longing for justice and liberty. It's in finding His face in each other, in the shared story of our lives, that we will be saved.