

Homily 4th Sunday of Advent (23.12.18)

John the Baptist leapt in the womb of Elizabeth
at the approach of Jesus' mother.
Coincidence? Like Elizabeth, be open in our lives,
to all the subtle promptings of the Holy Spirit.

You know, as I was pondering the readings this week, I was thinking how much of the prophets we've been listening to through Advent in the weekdays, as well as Sunday, alluding to the mysteries of the incarnation. And I think we maybe have sometimes a wrong view of Christian prophecy and prophets. I think we tend to think that they're a bit like those real or fake Gypsies in circuses that have a glass globe and predict what's going to happen to you. Well, the primary function of the prophet, the calling of the prophet, was to deal with the signs of the times, the things that were happening, and to call people back to faithfulness. And often their oracles, when they had a vision or an inspiration by the Spirit, was for their own time. And of course it came to them, not in a direct sense, the Holy Spirit didn't speak through the radio and dictate to them. It was a movement within them, because no one can see God and live. You know, God is beyond our grasp, but he can infuse knowledge into a person by the power of the Spirit.

And also, they're restricted by their own mental abilities. And so, they express things obviously in their own words and circumstances of the day. And when you take that into account, then the things they said come alive for us when we look back, they shoot out the page. And some, like the Minor Prophets, like Micah, they're super, I love the Minor Prophets. Their books are very tiny in the Old Testament: Amos, Hosea, Micah and so on. They're well worth looking at and using as prayerful meditations.

And so, if you think that Micah was dealing with the dispersion of the Jews to the known ends of the earth through persecution, and he starts off this prophecy of restoration, calling people back to the Holy Land, that God would restore them. And he starts off with

“you, Bethlehem, Ephrata.”

Well, amazing, isn't it? Because we know the Messiah was born in Bethlehem.

“You're least of the clans of Judea and out of you will be born for me the one who is to rule over Israel.”

Now, Micah probably meant a new king for his own day. That there will be restored a semi-restored kingdom. But a bit like poetry, he's captured more than he understood in his prophecy. You know, often a poet, we talk about the inspired poet, don't we, in the news, and when they write something, you'll get poets who'll say,

“Well, that means more than I ever meant it to be. I didn't see the consequences of what I had written.”

And this is very true of somebody like Micah. And even that little thing that he says... You know, his origins go to the distant past. You know, for us it recalls,

“The word made flesh, he was eternal with the Father, and he will feed his flock with the power of the Lord, the good shepherd.”

All those words come alive for us retrospectively.

But the real focus of today in the Gospel is the two women, Mary and Elizabeth. And they would have been imbued with their faith and the knowledge of the prophets. They'd have an idea of what the prophet said, even if they didn't know the words verbatim. They would have understood about Micah, and all this promise of restoration. And here were Mary and Elizabeth in a terrible time with a Roman occupation. This message must have meant something for them personally, because Elizabeth was unable to have a child, at least that's what the Bible says. Unfortunately, they didn't have much medical knowledge, and it could have been Zachariah's fault, couldn't it? You know, if they had gone to the doctor, he might have had problems, you know, but the woman gets blamed, of course, which is only right [laughter]. And Elizabeth, of course, she... You can imagine the whispers, because people thought that if you were childless, it was a punishment by God, because you must have done something wrong. It was a popular belief of the day. Jesus would, of course, contradict that and say,

“This person did not sin”, the affliction is not to do with that.

So we'd get a contradiction by Jesus of that popular belief. But you can imagine the neighbours whispering in a small village,

"Oh, she didn't have a child, you know, something... She must have done something very bad... "

: All that sort of thing, sort of gossip that we don't do, which is great, because we are good Catholics. [laughter]

And Mary, of course, she was a scandal, because she was having a child, but nobody knew who the father was! So that's a bit of a Devil, isn't it? [laughter] Yep, it's bit tricky. But these two women are put forward to us as part of that restoration: The sign of God restoring his people. And they are also put forward as people of great courage and strength, because of their situation and how they stood firm, because they were firm in faith, and they listened to the Word of God and believed it. And the lovely touch I like... And we unfortunately in a modern age, we unfortunately in a modern age 'poo poo' things like this. You know, we say to ourselves,

"Oh, that was just coincidence."

But God works through coincidence. You know, there's so much coincidence in life, you start to ask yourself,

"Was that just coincidence that happened to me then? or was there more to it".

So, okay, the child jumps in her womb, and we say big deal. But she didn't think that when Mary had come through the door and this happened, she put two and two together and said this was a blessing. Now, you could have said,

"Well, it just happened at the same time,"

but they were open, these people, they were open to seeing in every day, ordinary day life, signs from God. So even though it says she was filled with the Holy Spirit, it's the reverse way around I would suggest to you. That the child moved, because she believed in the word and she met Mary and she was open to the spirit that let her see this great grace. And so, these two women are also a lesson to us in faith, on the cusp of Christmas, on the cusp of the birth of the Messiah, that we should be open to the promptings of the spirit, seeing in everyday life,

"Gosh, that was a coincidence. But was it? Was that a sign to me of a blessing or whatever or a warning?"

So these two women are put to us as good disciples. Something we should copy and emulate.