



Fourth Sunday in Advent

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 19 December 2021

READINGS

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46-55 for the Psalm; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

Mary's example

Greetings Friends. Today, being the fourth and final Sunday before celebrating the Feast of the Incarnation, our attention turns to the roles played by Mary and Elizabeth in the lead-up to Christmas. I wish to explore these today by way of a question that was asked by a parishioner just last week. But before doing this, allow me to make some preliminary remarks about our Gospel reading.

This features Mary's famous visit to Elizabeth, at which point John the Baptist is said to have leapt for joy in Elizabeth's womb. It also features the Magnificat which, apart from magnifying the name of God, celebrates what is sometimes referred to in Luke's Gospel as the Great Reversal, that is, a reversal of the fortunes of the people of Israel, in particular, the lowly, downtrodden, poor and outcast – "[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, while the rich he has sent away empty." This theme of the Great Reversal appears in the blessings and woes of Luke 6 as well as in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16.

But our Gospel reading, in Elizabeth's greeting to Mary, also features part of the Hail Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." The Hail Mary and the saying of the rosary is, within the Roman Catholic Church, one of the most common expressions of individual piety (and communal piety for that matter, for I believe that families pray the rosary together). Depending on your inclination as Anglican, the praying of the Rosary might indeed be one of your very own cherished traditions. But this leads us to look at the cultic role played by Mary and, so that we gain as much clarity on this as possible, I am going to consider this from an Anglo-Catholic (or Catholic) perspective. The question I referred to at the beginning of the homily, posed by the parishioner, was one that perhaps many of us have asked which is namely, why do we assign a gender to God, since God, by definition, transcends all human categories (categories which are by their nature limited)?

Though we might not arrive at a satisfactory answer, we could perhaps deepen our understanding of God's nature in attempting to. Within the Catholic tradition, Mary occupies an entirely unique and peculiar position, when compared with how she is viewed in any of the other Christian denominations (bar the Orthodox tradition). Here Mary is venerated – not worshipped mind you – but venerated (though I have not always been able to understand the difference). Mary, like other saints within the Catholic tradition, is also prayed to – indeed this is, in effect, what the Hail Mary and the saying of the rosary is largely about – in part, an extended time of praying to Mary. Mary is referred to as the Theotokos,

meaning that Mary is the mother or bearer of God. Mary is also said to be sinless since, apart from this quality she would be unfit to bear the title of Theotokos.

Jesus, like Mary, was also sinless. So here we have Mary, a figure who is without sin and who, in a technical sense, gives life to God and who, perhaps for this reason, is also prayed to and venerated. One might be forgiven then for thinking that Mary occupies a position mid-way between divinity and humanity – without being God, she nevertheless has some divine attributes and, certainly, in the pantheon of Saints, is, apart from Jesus, the closest human to God – hence, again, within the Catholic tradition, her power to intercede for Christians on earth.

Now listen to the following quote from Scripture and see whether you are able to recognise which book of the Bible it comes from:

*There is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy,
unique, manifold, subtle,
mobile, clear, unpolluted,
distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen,
irresistible,²³ beneficent, humane,
steadfast, sure, free from anxiety,
all-powerful, overseeing all,
and penetrating through all spirits
that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle.*

²⁴ *For wisdom is more mobile than any motion;
because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.*

²⁵ *For she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.*

²⁶ *For she is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.*

²⁷ *Although she is but one, she can do all things,
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
in every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God, and prophets;*

²⁸ *for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom.*

²⁹ *She is more beautiful than the sun,
and excels every constellation of the stars.*

Compared with the light she is found to be superior,

³⁰ *for it is succeeded by the night,
but against wisdom evil does not prevail.*

You might have realised that this passage comes from the book of Wisdom (chapter 7:23-30) and is in fact a description of Wisdom – a feminine persona who appears within the wisdom tradition as having God-like qualities. Based on this, and on the popularity of the cult of Mary, is it reasonable to suggest that human beings, at least within the Judeo-Christian tradition, have a real and deep need to incorporate a feminine aspect or component into the deity?

And so, this fourth Sunday in Advent, as we celebrate Mary's role and her great example, we believe and pray and trust, that we will come to know God more in all of God's fullness. Amen