

The last Sunday of Advent

Advent always seems to go very fast

We have so much to do

And Christmas is upon us

It is even worse this year

Because we have a very short Advent

The 4th week of Advent is only 2 days

Monday is Christmas Eve

But we still have an important lesson

There is still time to prepare

Time to prepare to receive Christ

We do this by faith and grace

We see in the reading from Micah

It is not about the things of the world

The savior will come from Bethlehem

A clan that is too small to even be a clan of Judah

And remember, Judah itself was no great shakes

When God chose them as His Chosen People

They were not a powerful or important people

They were not a large population

And even what was there

God separated

He called Abraham to go with his family

With his meager possessions

From this humble beginning

God would create a family

A nation of priests, prophets and kings

God would do great things

But it would be God doing them

Not human strength and ingenuity

But they had one thing

They had faith

We know Abraham is our father in faith

It is this faith, made perfect in Mary, that is alive in our hearts today

Not faith alone

But a faith that comes alive by grace

We see in our second reading another thing following God is not

It is not about offering animal sacrifice

It is not about the law

These had their place

But they never offered salvation

These are external

Their only cost is external

Yes, the law is fulfilled

They could not sell what they offered

So they had fewer possessions

But they could be very generous in these external offerings

They could keep the law perfectly

And their hearts could be far from God at the same time

We see the offering of Christ

Behold, I come to do your will

We see the offering of Mary

Be it done to me according to your will

This is an offering of the heart

We see this in our first reading as well

And if we read a bit more, we see Micah's teaching

What shall I offer to the Lord that is worthy?

Shall I offer holocausts unto him, and calves of a year old?

Shall I give my firstborn for my wickedness?

The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

I will show you, O man, what is good,

And what the Lord requires of you:

To do justice,

To love mercy

And to walk humbly with your God

This is what pleases God

This is the faith of Elizabeth

This is the perfect faith of Mary

But it is not faith alone

It is faith fueled by grace

A faith that comes alive in our hearts

A faith that drives us to do God's will

A faith that spurred Elizabeth to say

Blessed are you among women

Really, the first Beatitude

And the source of this blessing is Mary's faith

She didn't go around establishing churches

She didn't preach great homilies

She didn't govern the Church her son was to start

She believed

She believed God could do what the angel told her

She believed God would do these things

And in faith, she said 'yes'

She surrendered her plan for her life

And opened her heart to God's plan

That is how we prepare our hearts

It is sometimes too easy to get caught up in the spiritual

Reflecting on the theological or spiritual meaning of Christmas

Although these are important

But if they leave us there

It is like following the law or offering sacrifices

They can remain spiritual

And not become real

They don't touch our hearts

We are called to do both

We read in the Gospel

Mary kept all these things in her heart

She reflected on what these things meant to her

And to the world

But it was more

Advent for Mary brought her to a simple human response

She went off to visit her cousin Elizabeth

To serve her in her last months of pregnancy

Mary was filled with grace

From the moment of her conception

And this grace opened her heart to faith

And with this grace filled faith, she said yes to God

And her yes brought our savior into the world as a tiny babe

But what do we do if we think we don't have this grace?

If we don't have this faith?

We respond with open hearts

Like Zachary

When the angel appeared to him

He didn't have the faith to respond as Mary did

But God didn't leave him where he was

He responded as he was able

And Zachary became the father of John the Baptist

God did not leave Zachary with a lack of faith

God doesn't leave us where we are either

He calls

He invites

He asks us to respond in faith

Whether this faith is in full bloom

Or whether it is in need of grace so it can bloom

When we open our hearts

We allow God to act

Not necessarily as we would

But as he desires

So we can imitate Mary

With true Marian devotion

Not by chasing all over the world

Going to all the shrines we can

Not by being preoccupied with every devotion that can fill our day

Don't get me wrong

These are great and beautiful things

But if we are not careful, they can become just words

True Marian devotion is imitation of her virtues

Imitation of her faith

And responding our own grace-filled and faith-filled Yes

Bringing Christ not only into our hearts

But also into the world

Making him alive in new ways wherever we are sent

Like Mary, going to serve her cousin

Even as she prepared to give birth

Bringing Christ with her, wherever she went