

Homily at Mass 4th Sunday of Advent Year C – 22 December 2018

On the cusp of Christmas, we come to the last Sunday of Advent, a day always devoted to Our Lady. With just a couple of days to go before Christmas day, we've all probably come to the church for Sunday Mass today just wanting to catch our breath, to find some peace of mind; some stillness, some focus rather than the hubbub of the shops, end of year events, last minute pressure at work, and everything else. Let's now find ourselves sitting beside Mary. Let's snuggle up close to her. Let's feel her warmth. Let's be conscious that she is pregnant, and now close to giving birth. Her womb swells with the full grown presence of the baby who is Jesus, Son of God and Son of Mary.

Today the Gospel brings us to the small village of Ain Karin, southwest of Jerusalem, not all that far from Bethlehem. Two churches can be found in this village – one built over the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth where John the Baptist was born: the other built over the place where tradition attests that the Visitation of Mary to her cousin took place. Ain Karin is one of those places – like Fatima in Portugal and Lourdes in France – where you can feel the presence of Our Lady. The day that Mgr Diamond and I along with 2 or 3 other priests visited Ain Karin you could feel the peace, the stillness, the gentle joy of Mary and Elizabeth.

St Luke uses words in such a way that you can picture the events of the Gospel in your mind's eye. Not only is St Luke a brilliant wordsmith, but tradition also suggests that he was an artist as well, and a number of icons of Our Lady attributed to St Luke have come down to us. St Luke paints today's Gospel story with beautiful colours and expressive brushstrokes: Mary went quickly ... she went into Zechariah's house ... the child leapt (or danced) in Elizabeth's womb ... Elizabeth cried out: "of all women you are the most blessed ... blessed is the fruit of your womb ... blessed is she who believed that the Lord's promise would be fulfilled." Can you see these two women? Can you picture the house? Can you hear their excited and joy filled conversation? Can you even picture the infant John leaping – bouncing – dancing before Mary's son still hidden in her womb?

St Luke teaches us so much of what we know about Mary and what we believe about her. Mary of Nazareth – a young girl, probably a teenager, a faithful and devout daughter of Israel, specially chosen by God at the time of her conception – a conception in the womb of her mother St Ann that we call 'immaculate'. From the first moment of her life, in view of the extraordinary vocation God had in mind for her, to be the human mother of his Son, and in view of all that Christ would do for the human race by his Cross, Mary was preserved free from Original Sin from the start. When the angel of God greets her he says, "hail, full of grace." This is how God knows Mary – full of grace, full of divine life, full of holiness, goodness, purity – her mind and her heart ever and always open to God and his will for Mary and for us. Elizabeth acknowledges this too: Mary is blessed among all women. Blessed – chosen – unique – tota pulchra es: all beautiful, all lovely. Elizabeth also honours Mary's unique vocation: "the mother of my Lord" i.e. Mother of the King, the Queen Mother we would say. This makes Mary's visit to Elizabeth a royal visit – but Mary comes to her cousin not to be served but rather to serve – to be with her elderly cousin in the last months of her pregnancy, to help, to support, to be a friend. In her 'yes' to the Angel Mary personifies the 1st commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength". In running to Ain Karim and in the 3 months she spends in the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary shows us how to love our neighbour too.

But enough of words on this last Advent Sunday – we want to spend some time quietly, today, close to Mary, God's Mother and ours. Let's turn to her now and pray, saying the prayer we learnt from our parents and teachers, a prayer that comes to us from the Angel Gabriel and John the Baptist's mother St Elizabeth: Hail Mary ...