

## ADVENT IV (The Sunday of St Mary the Virgin) 21 December 2021

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White in St Mark's Church, Bridgewater, Connecticut

*Micah 5.2-5a; Psalm 80.1-7; Hebrews 10.5-10; Luke 1.39-55*

In the homily last week, Blanche pointed out that last Sunday had a name -- *Gaudete* Sunday, *gaudete* being the Latin word for 'rejoice'. In the many centuries when we observed Advent as a penitential season (a short Lent: notice the purple vestments), the third Sunday in Advent was a day relaxation of the austerity, a day when we could rejoice to see the light of Christmas at the end of the tunnel of penance, a sign that Christmas joy was fewer than fourteen days away.

And ... all of the Sundays in Advent have names: the first is simply 'Advent Sunday'; the second is 'The Sunday of St John the Baptist', the 'Baptiser', when we always re-encounter the last of the Hebrew prophets whose preaching of a baptism of repentance for forgiveness was the basis of Jesus' own ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing.

And today, the final Sunday in Advent and the Sunday next before Christmas Eve, is the Sunday we call 'The Sunday of St Mary the Virgin' because on it we always re-encounter the only human being in Jesus' life more consequential, more influential, than John—his mother who agrees to bear God's son, to give to the Divine human flesh. When the Archangel Gabriel appears and tells her that God has chosen her for this role, she replies humbly, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord'. (The theology is perhaps a bit unfair to poor old St Joseph ....)

We need to remember that the stories of John's birth and that of Jesus' own are intimately connected. John's mother is Elizabeth, an older cousin (or an aunt or a great aunt—we are not sure), of Mary herself. Elizabeth's husband is the equally senior Zechariah, and, like the ancient Abraham and Sarah in the Hebrew Scriptures, they are past expecting to have children: John, like Abraham's and Sarah's son Isaac, comes as a real surprise to older parents.

Zechariah is a priest in the Temple, and six months before the Archangel Gabriel appears to Mary, he has suddenly shown up at Zechariah's side as Zechariah is offering incense within the Temple whilst crowds are praying without. Gabriel tells Zechariah that Elizabeth is to have a child whom they will name John, and that the spirit of the Prophet Elijah will be given to the boy 'to make a people ready for the Lord'.

The astonished and terrified Zechariah allows that this sounds pretty far-fetched, and Gabriel says that, because he is sceptical of God's power, he will be struck dumb and will be unable to speak until he and Elizabeth indeed have the son. Which is precisely what happens.

Zechariah emerges from the Temple, the crowds see that he is dazed and literally speechless, and when Elizabeth learns that she is pregnant she marvels at how God has looked favorably upon her prayers for a child. When John is born and ready to be circumcised—the occasion when he is to receive his name—his aunts, uncles, and their neighbors, protest when Elizabeth dutifully says that he will be called John: it is not a family name. They turn to the mute Zechariah to agree with

them, Zechariah asks for tablet and (having learned his lesson) writes, ‘His name is John’, and suddenly he begins again to speak, with relief praising God.

That story about Gabriel, Zechariah, and Elizabeth helps us a bit to understand why Mary is so remarkable, so special. Zechariah is a priest in the Temple: he knows the Scriptural stories full well – those of Abraham, Sarah, and their son the patriarch Isaac; of Elkanah, Hannah, and their son the prophet Samuel. Yet, he greets Gabriel’s words with incredulity, with ‘How than anything so preposterous happen ..?’, when he already knows that this is how God has worked before: unexpected births are often signals of God’s actions.

Zechariah’s wife Elizabeth, upon discovering her pregnancy, simply gives thanks to God; and Mary, before she knows that she is pregnant, says even more devoutly, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’. Mary not only believes but is obedient. She accepts the task that God assigns her, her role and her place in God’s purposes.

This morning we hear the prophet Micah foretell that God will use one of ‘the little clans of Judah’ and (unpredictably) not one of the priestly clans of the Temple, ‘to bring forth [the] one who is to rule’ the Holy People ‘in the majesty of the name of the Lord’. And we hear the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews insist that one of the most remarkable things about Jesus is that he appears saying, ‘See, I have come to do your will, O God’. For, God’s will is to reject the sacrifices and offerings of the Temple cult and to receive sacrifices of obedience, of people actively blessing the world as God seeks to bless it.

You see the four Sundays of Advent are about us learning again who the Christ whose birth we await is. He fulfills the prophets who have proclaimed his arrival amongst us; he accepts John’s baptism of repentance (of agreeing to change and try again) for forgiveness (for being freed from obedience to anything or anyone other than God). He thinks and acts in ways that are not our ways, in ways that we do not expect ... just as God always does. And the Christ gives us the example of what it is obediently to do the will of God: it is not rituals by rote but rather ... loving –loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Which really challenges us, each of us, and we too often find it easier just to ignore the summons; which is why (from time to time) God needs to attract our attentions, sometimes by a truly unexpected and seemingly preposterous event ... such as a remarkable birth. Amen.