

4th Sunday of Advent (C)
(Micah 5:1-4 / Luke 1:39-44)
23.12.2018

At this stage of our Advent journey our thoughts are turned to the first coming of Jesus. We are led to think of Jesus' birth in what the Christmas carol hails as the *Little Town of Bethlehem*.

O Little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.

With the opening words of the prophet Micah heard in today's liturgy we are invited to consider the significance of Bethlehem, that humble, little town in Judea which was chosen by God to be the setting for the greatest event in history: the coming of the Lord to be with His People in human flesh: *You Bethlehem Ephrathah, the least of the clans of Judah, out of you will be born for me the One to rule over Israel. His origin goes back to the distant past, to the days of old.* The New Testament writers will go on to affirm that the origin of the One born in Bethlehem goes back not only to the distant past, but remounts to when before all time began: He pre-existed!

It is striking that out of a place the world considered to be of little consequence (Bethlehem) – an insignificant town we might say – our Mighty God chose to bring forth true greatness.

I said it is striking that God should act in this way, but is it really surprising? Just think of it, is it not typical of our God to choose what is small, what is weak, what appears of be without importance, what might be considered to be of no consequence, to do great things? This is a point made over and over again in the Sacred Scriptures. Remember the Lord's choice of His servant David, the man after His own heart whom He called to pasture His People. The boy David seemed inconsequential to Samuel, but with God's help Samuel finally recognised in David God's chosen one – the one the Lord wished to see anointed king. Evidently, on the surface of things, David did not project the image of the sort of leader people expected. He was an unlikely candidate for several reasons. First, there was simply his youth; he was the last son in a society based upon the primacy of the first-born. Moreover, he was someone who was ethnically mixed; he was not a pure Israelite, because his grandmother was Ruth, an immigrant from Moab. Although David had these things – and certainly other odds – stacked up against him the Lord recognised in this shepherd boy what he was looking for. He saw potential in David. The Lord perceived that there was promise in this unlikely candidate. As the prophet tells us: *The Lord sees not as man sees. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*

Again and again, as we read our way through the Bible we see how those who are called the *anawim* (that is, the poor of every sort... the vulnerable, the marginalised, those of lowly status and without earthly prestige) are frequently those who are sought out and used by God to accomplish His greatest works. So much so, that I can't think of as many chosen candidates who were qualified for God's work as I can think of men and women who didn't seem to have what was needed from the standpoint of human reasoning alone.

Not least among God's *anawim* was Mary of Nazareth – a humble virgin girl (remember in Judaism virginity denoted/denotes radical poverty – shame even). Nazareth was another small and rather insignificant town. You will remember that note of surprise voiced in the gospel story: *Nazareth? What good could come out that place?* Joseph would also have been considered to be someone drawn from of this same class. As parents, Mary and Joseph would have raised Jesus in the spirit of their class, the spirit of the *anawim*.

When it comes to Jesus Himself, we are told by Paul in his Letter to the Philippians that by choice Jesus espoused lowly estate. *He emptied Himself.* Christ's self-emptying went to great lengths. He assumed the lowliest rank among those of the servant class; *He became a slave.* The Master's gesture on the eve of His passion – when He stooped to wash His disciples' feet

– signified that in Jesus’ own mind and heart, He clearly saw Himself as holding the last place in the midst of the little community of disciples He had gathered around Him. It was the least of the servants who washed feet.

As followers of Jesus we are called to see ourselves as part of God’s *anawim*: His poor and lowly ones. We are called to be men and women who dare to remain faithful to God in times of difficulty as the *anawim* did – not least times of the oppression. We are called today to be what the Sacred Scriptures refer to as *God’s little remnant*. Understand me correctly. I am not advocating that we see ourselves as Christians to be *the purest of the pure* – members of some small elite group. That is a false understanding of the biblical notion of the *little remnant* – and it is one that some are expounding more and more today in certain Church circles. This false notion of *the remnant* is not what I am talking about at all. What I am advocating is that we see ourselves as *the poorest of the poor...* among the least in this world’s eyes: men and women who dare to see ourselves for who and what we are: lowly people, folk of little consequence, men and women of no great significance, taken *per se*. We are of no real importance without reference to and dependence upon the Lord our God whom we are called to serve in humility of heart. It is our belonging to Him that gives us honour and glory – what the Fathers of the Church call *nobility*.

Saying that, what Paul writes at the end of chapter 1 of his First Letter to the Corinthians comes to mind: *Notice among yourselves, dear brothers, that few of you who follow Christ have big names or power or wealth. Instead, God has deliberately chosen to use ideas and people whom the world considered foolish and of little worth in order to shame those people considered by the world to be wise and great. He has chosen a plan despised by the world, counted as nothing at all, and used to bring down to nothing those the world considers great, so that no one anywhere can ever brag in the presence of God.* I see these words as applicable to us. Few of us have big names; few of us have mighty influence.

In his Letter to the Christian community at Corinth – a community in something of the same shape as the Church in our own day and age (a Church divided, a Church exposed as far from pure, a Church deeply wounded in so many respects) – Paul pointed out that God’s plan to restore and heal is of another order than the best human plans people could devise. The Lord does not primarily use our human wisdom, strength and skills. We don’t have to be rich and qualified. We certainly shouldn’t estimate ourselves to be self-sufficient. Far from it! What is required of us as we engage in God’s work is to recognise our powerlessness and weakness – our need for God. As a result of the admission of our own incapacities, we become men and women who are increasingly dependent upon God’s grace and power. Paul’s insights console us. He shares his own experience with us when he puts into written word what he heard the Lord say to him in his heart: *My grace is sufficient for you.* Elsewhere he reflects – again speaking out of experience: *God’s strength makes itself manifest best in human weakness.*

There is something very reassuring in the thought that our God is famous for using insignificant people and inadequate means to achieve great good. He can (and will) take and use us – if only we have the humility to allow ourselves to be used by Him and display the generosity required of us, engaging ourselves in the Lord’s service.

Some of us might still be tempted to protest in our prayer: *Lord, how could you even think of using me with all You know about me?* While such an expression of disbelief may be born of a certain self-awareness – which is no bad thing in a person – we must nonetheless be vigilant not to allow our consciousness of our weaknesses to convince us of our incapacity to do God’s work. It is, after all, *God’s work* we are talking about, not our work for God! When it comes to the work of God, Paul reminds us that *whatever good we do is all God’s work within us!*

We must remember how the Lord can take our really broken and genuinely useless lives and still turn them into a blessing for others – if only we allow Him to do so. If only we place our

lives, as they are, in the God's hands, saying to Him, as Teresa of Avila was wont to say: *Do with me what You will.*

Let's think of David for a moment – David whom we have already referred to – David, the shepherd boy. David immediately comes to mind with the mention of Bethlehem. This is where He was from. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which, while little, was nonetheless the royal town of David. The text from Micah heard in today's first reading reminded us that God's People were seen by the Lord as His flock. Interestingly, David was pasturing sheep when the Lord called Him. David's faithful performance in his care for his little flock of sheep – his doing the simple job in hand – was clearly considered by God as his preparation for the mission that lay before him: the mission to be shepherd and guardian of Israel. Of course, we know only too well that David didn't get everything right in his life. God's choice did not deliver David from his fallibility and human weaknesses; he was not spared from making some terrible mistakes, even after having responded to his vocation. And yet... and yet... he was and is still regarded as *the model king of Israel*. Jesus is depicted as the *Son of David*. It is accentuated for us in the Scriptures that confirmation of Jesus' messianic identity is His being *of David's line*. It might be asked: why was David and why is David still considered great? What if I was to suggest: primarily, because of his humility? The Scriptures show us that David – for all his faults – was always willing to recognise his failings and his weaknesses. He was ready to acknowledge and express regret for his sin; to admit to the truth and to face up to it and to show himself contrite and filled with compunction. The *Miserere* (Psalm 50) – perhaps the most beautiful psalm in the entire psalter – is an eloquent testimony to David's humility of heart. Even in the midst of his failures, pain, guilt and shame, David's primary aim and objective was to know and serve God; however broken he was, David remained a man whose primary aim in life was to love. Something else worth mentioning is the fact that David never lost hope in God – hope which is another characteristic virtue of those men and women who are humble of heart and aware of their existential poverty. Even in the deepest moments of confusion and chaos in his life, David dared to believe in God's love for himself and for the people confided to his care. In the assurance of God's love, the shepherd-king found peace, comfort and consolation. David knew that God's love for the people depended not solely upon his person; it was about more than himself. Every true servant of the Lord to whom the care of others has been confided will know that God cares for the flock and not just the shepherd. Good shepherds and faithful people go together in God's eyes and should do in ours!

Every true servant of the Lord will recognise that the call addressed to them is to be self-forgetful – more concerned about others than their self. We see the healthy self-forgetfulness I speak of here illustrated perfectly in Mary, the mother of Jesus: Mary who was the servant *par excellence*. Mary could well have thought of herself first, but she didn't. In the opening line of today's gospel we read: *Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah*. She went there to see to the needs of her elderly cousin, Elizabeth. The virgin-girl of Nazareth took a great risk in making that journey. She travelled a hazardous road. Her example is a call and an invitation for us to be as generous as she was. In a well-known prayer, the pray-er is invited to address Mary with these words: *When you learned that your cousin Elizabeth was in need, you immediately went to serve her and offer your help. Help us, like you, to be concerned for others*. May our concern for others be apparent during this season of good will.

Like David and like Mary, of whom today's readings have us think, let us dare to place our lives in God's hands to be of service to His *Holy Faithful People*. May we live whatever is asked of us in humility of heart. May we, do as St Bernadette said she would, *spend our every moment loving* in whatever we are requested to do.

I have spoken of humility, we should be careful to get things right in this whole domain. While we should never to over-estimate ourselves, neither should we under-estimate the contribution that we could make. C.S. Lewis strikes the proper balance in regard to humility when he reminds us that *Humility is not thinking less of oneself, it's thinking of oneself less*. Thomas Merton comes in with this piece of wisdom which puts us on our guard against the tendency within us to tend towards *false humility*; he gives a kind of barometer by which to measure how we are situated before God and others when he writes: *Pride makes us artificial (whereas true) humility makes us real*.

We must ask ourselves: Are we real? This is what God wants us to be: real people!

If and when it happens that we are used by the Lord for great tasks, may we be able to repeat this very *real* gospel word to keep ourselves grounded in the truth: *We are all only servants*.

With realism, Jesus said to His disciples something He reiterates and addresses as wise counsel to us today: *When you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are just unworthy servants; we have done only what was required of us, our duty'*.