

REFLECTION

DECEMBER 24, 2017 – 4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Today we celebrate the Fourth Week of Advent which is so abbreviated. We only have one more day to pray the beautiful psalms and antiphons of longing. How fitting that the Gospel for this Sunday tells us the story of Mary for whom the miracle of birth is about to happen. Luke's presentation of the Angel Gabriel's appearance is one that we could almost recite from memory – so familiar and so loved is it. As I was thinking about the astonishment Mary must have felt on so many levels – this mysterious man coming suddenly into her space and interrupting her prayer, this question unheard of by any woman before her, the promise of salvation that was so much on the minds of her people, but most of all, the manner in which this promise would take place, all of it truly almost unbelievable.

Our question – How could Mary respond affirmatively – when everything the Angel says seems contrary to what is possible in our rational world. How can Mary say “Yes” to such an outlandish, or maybe heavenly, request, presented to her??? She didn't even have the time to discern, or to consult with other persons who could help her to see if this was a call from God. She didn't have all the details about what this might mean for her future. She didn't have the opportunity to reflect on whether this fit in with her understanding of the promise to her people.

No, she had to give her answer on the spot. What would she say? Whether she realized it or not, the fate of the world would rest on her response.

Let me now move to something that seems unrelated, (but really is)! Recently I read some words of Pope Francis. He was delivering his Christmas message to the Vatican Curia in which he said one of the problems in the Church today is that we can develop what he called a “sickness of mental and spiritual hardening: that of those who, along the way, lose their inner serenity, vivacity and boldness and conceal themselves behind paper, becoming working machines rather than men of God. He named it a sclerotic heart. . . . Francis continues “It is dangerous to lose the human sensibility necessary to be able to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice! It is the sickness of those who lose those sentiments that were present in Jesus Christ.”

We are all familiar with the medical term ‘arteriosclerosis’ – the hardening of the arteries. It is not as dangerous as it once was because people can have stents inserted and can take medicine to lessen the condition. However, we do know that the condition leads to serious heart ailments, including heart attacks, and will often cause death. So – isn’t it interesting that Pope Francis uses this image, a sclerotic heart, a ‘hardened heart’ to characterize the condition of becoming less

able to hear the Word of God, of developing such a big ego that we are less aware of the needs of those around us, that our own self-fulfillment becomes so all encompassing that we cannot hear the cries of those in pain around us.

Pope Francis begs us to ‘tune in’, to ‘walk in another’s shoes’, to ‘listen with the ear of our heart’ as St. Benedict said, so that our hearts can remain soft and supple, always able to contract and expand in responding to the cries of the poor, both physical and spiritual. He exhorts us to maintain our inner serenity along with our vivacity and boldness in order to respond to God’s call in our life with full compassion. His words are so beautiful – we need to be able to “weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice. Hardness of heart is “ the sickness of those who lose those sentiments that were present in Jesus Christ”.

And now, back to Mary – even facing the difficult questions that confronted her in the visit from Gabriel, she didn’t need answers that so many of us would require. She only needed the OPEN HEART described by Pope Francis; soft supple, able to feel compassion and concern for her people suffering under the harsh rule of the Romans and the legalistic demands of the religious rulers, the Pharisees. No sclerotic heart for Mary. She was able to see beyond her own needs and desires to embrace the

cries of the poor in her own people. She was able to trust, to have faith in a loving God, and to have confidence that God would lead her. “Fiat” – Let God’s will be done in me was her ready response.

Mary is the example *par excellence* of the soft and supple heart, the opposite of the hardened or sclerotic heart cited by Francis. Through her openness, her love, her trust, her confidence that God was leading her, she could say “Yes” even to the most astonishing request – to be the Mother of the Savior who was promised to the people through David and his descendants.

Now, it is our turn – to pray for, and to cultivate an open heart through which we can say “Fiat” to whatever our call may be, today in Advent and tomorrow in the Christmas tide.

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