

4th Sunday of Advent (C)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
December 19, 20, 2015

In today's gospel we meet Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. Both are pregnant under unusual circumstances: Mary is young and unmarried, and Elizabeth is old, well beyond child bearing years, **and** childless up to this point. The other matter that clearly qualifies these two women for their prominence this last Sunday of Advent, and even for their mention in the Scriptures at all, is that they are clearly 'women of God'. Elizabeth's husband, Zacariah, was a priest in the Jewish religion, and Mary is hailed as 'full of grace'. Both had a sense of God, and both were open to the will of God, the plan and purpose of God. While these women may have seemed like all other women of their day, they are not lightweight people.

Today's First Scripture quickly mentions "Bethlehem", the city of David. But we also hear that it is small, and not of much influence among the other towns and cities of the time. Yet, it was to become great and significant. In today's other Scripture we hear that when Christ comes into the world, the religious priorities change. Sacrifices and offerings become less important and the gift of oneself, even one's very body became primary:

*"Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me:
in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight."*

Both Elizabeth and Mary gave the gift of their bodies to birth their children, John the Baptist and Jesus respectively. Clearly God's plan depends on our willingness to be involved in a significant way. It is more than sacrifice; it is more than coming to Mass. God's plan requires the gift of our very lives.

During the past week I connected these Scriptural and liturgical themes with the fact that with the closeness of Christmas everyone is thinking about gifts and 'gifting':

- for whom do you still want to find a Christmas gift?
- are you trying to remember where you put the gifts that you purchased while on vacation last summer? -your children are eagerly awaiting to see what gifts they may receive -of course there are the many 'gifting' letters that come these days from any number of charitable groups.
- just maybe there are some young women wondering if this is the Christmas when the diamond ring will be under the tree
- and here in the parish we are bringing food gifts for those in need.

It is hard not to think about gifts when we are just days from the Feast of the greatest gift in the world, the gift of our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. It was

easy for me to move from thoughts of gifts and gifting to ‘vocation to priesthood and religious life’, and particularly to the idea that families might see these vocations as gifts they are invited to support and nurture. Mary and Elizabeth are real women. Mary, in particular, is much more than a statue, and she was not always a grown woman. As we find her in today’s gospel, she is a mere teenage girl, yet she gave her life to God’s plan.

Do families today ever think and even talk about the gift of one of their children to the work of God in a religious vocation? Do families feel that a daughter who enters the convent, or a son who wants to be a priest or religious brother is responding to a gift from God, the gift of God's call to serve the work of the Kingdom in a unique way? God desires and needs more than simply our prayers and our attendance at Mass. (We heard some of this last weekend as well). God desires our very lives, and our children are about as close to our very lives as we can get.

Over the years I have heard parents and other family members say to a son/daughter or sibling, “Why would you ever want to do that?” when they expressed interest in priesthood or religious life. I understand the sacrifice of such a choice: the appeal of a more lucrative and worldly job, and I understand the appeal and fun of grandchildren and extended family. But I also understand that it is God who calls people to religious life and to priesthood, and that we need to always support those who are hearing that call with our prayer and encouragement. Think of it in terms of ‘gift’. They make a gift of themselves to God and God's work, and you make a gift of your daughter, son to God, and to the work of God and the spread of God’s Kingdom.

In this season of gifting, talk and pray about the gift your family would make with a vocation to the priesthood and religious life. God calls people, and I have no doubt that God is calling someone from within our midst here today. We must be open to these calls just as Mary and Elizabeth were. Each person has a unique approach and special gifts, and God calls individuals based on those gifts. It may indeed be your daughter, your son. Listen to them, support them. Think of this as a gift to God and the Kingdom.

The days are coming! Your redemption is at hand!

(high school students shared about NCYC following the homily)