Advent Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Advent



Pope Benedict XVI

Mary's "Yes" and the Fulfillment of the Promise

Preached on the fourth Sunday in Advent in the Private Chapel of Mater Ecclesiae Monastery on December 21, 2014

Taken from *The Lord Holds Us by the Hand* by Pope Benedict XVI, pp. 60–63

Readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year B): 2 Sam 7:1–5, 8–12, 14, 16; Ps 89; Rom 16:25–27; Lk 1:26–38

This Gospel that we just heard is certainly one of the most beautiful passages in all of Sacred Scripture. The angel says to Mary: "Rejoice! Rejoice, because God is entering into history and is becoming one of us." In Mary's "yes", the Incarnation is accomplished; God is made man.

But in order to understand correctly the profundity of this event, of this passage, we must first of all listen to the message of the first reading, taken from the Book of Samuel. We are one thousand years before Christ. The story starts here. David, having arrived at the height of his power, after dramatic deeds, was finally able to unite all twelve tribes of Israel under his reign. He is the undisputed king of all Israel; he managed to win all the wars with the various kings who surrounded Israel and, at last, against all expectations, succeeded also in taking the city that was considered impregnable, Jerusalem, and thus created for himself a capital really worthy of a king.

In this moment, David thinks about God. He now lives in the palace—as he says—while God is still in the tent: God is still an itinerant God, in the tents of the Exodus. Therefore David wants to build a house worthy of God. God will be the guest of his city, will live in his city; the temple

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will be the glory of God, and God will also be the glory of his city and of his kingdom.

We can consider this plan of David as being motivated by a true love of God, a desire for the true glory of God and zeal for the primacy of God, but also a bit of human vanity: to have a glorious temple, to have God in one's own city and, with his temple, to have also more prestige outside of Israel. In any case, through his prophet, Nathan, God gives him different orders. He tells him: "You wish to build a house for me, but I will build a house for you."

Man cannot build a house for God; he is incapable of it. God does not live in houses made by human hands; God does not live in the middle of stones, in the middle of rocks. Only God can build a house for Himself; God is not our guest, but rather we are God's guests; God does not live with us, but rather we live with and in God. This is the great promise that occurs in this moment: God Himself will build a house for Himself through David and his son. This is already an announcement of what Jesus will mention before His Passion: "In three days I will build the new, true temple, my body, which is really the temple of God" (see Jn 2:19; Mt 26:61). Hence we all become God's temple, by being drawn into His body. And so we enter both into the mystery of the Incarnation and into the mystery of the Eucharist, in which He gives us His body and we become His body.

God promises three things. He promises a son of David, who will say to God: "Father". God will say to this king: "My son", and therefore promises him his dignity. Finally, God says: "Even if your sons must be punished, I will punish, but I will not renounce my faithfulness." And so this house does not depend on man's morality, but only on God's fidelity: because it is an eternal kingdom. All this appeared rather fantastic and, after the exile, no longer realistic, either; it seemed to be a sign that God had forgotten His promise. But this promise appears in its profound reality only at the moment of the annunciation in Nazareth. Now, God knocks at the door so as to become man definitively and thus to give us the king, the kingdom, and to show us His fidelity.

We see again briefly: "Rejoice!" This is a Greek greeting. In Israel the greeting was: *Shalom*—"Peace!", while in Greek it is: *Chaĩre*—"Rejoice!" And so today, in Israel, the universality of this promise unfolds: God will be not only king of Israel, but king of the entire world. Therefore "Rejoice!" is the greeting spoken to all of us. And, at the same time, this word of total fidelity to the promises made to David, to Israel, is also a word taken from the prophet Zephaniah, who says, "Rejoice, Zion, because the Lord will be in you; the Lord is with you!" (see Zeph 3:16–17). Literally the text says: "The Lord is in your womb." This is the expression used for the Ark of the Covenant: it is in Israel's womb, and through the Ark of the Covenant the Lord is to be in the womb of His people. All this takes on in the Gospel a totally unexpected significance: Mary, the living woman, is the living Ark of God; the Lord God really will be in her womb.

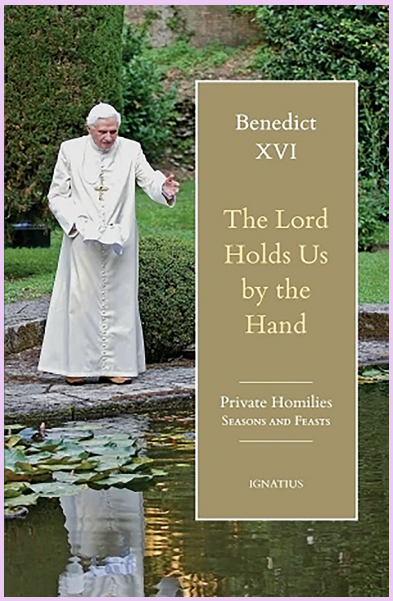
But we must also think of the dramatic character of this moment, which was explained well by Saint Bernard in one of his homilies.[1] God knocks at the world's door, at humanity's door. He makes Himself dependent on the free "yes" of a human person. Many are awaiting him, and Saint Bernard says to the Blessed Virgin: "I truly and profoundly await the answer that you will give me." If Mary, perhaps moved by humility, frightened by the greatness of God's will, were to say: "I am not worthy", what would happen? God could not enter into the world; He would not find a house. But, while everyone is waiting, Mary says: "Yes, I am the servant of the Lord." This is the moment of the true turning point in history: from this moment on, God is man, and with us, and He never abandons us again, not even in all the sorrows, in all the catastrophes, in all the situations of history. "Yes, I am your handmaid": this single event makes us truly rejoice.

We want to keep in mind also the fact that, in a certain way, this situation is repeated: God also knocks at the door of my life, of my heart, and wants to be conceived, wants to be born also in me and from me. And He still says: "I want to be born from you", and He waits for our "yes". Let us pray that the Lord will help us to say: "Yes, I am the servant of the Lord."

[1] See Bernard of Clairvaux, *Homilies on Our Lady*, 4, 8–9.

In this way, we accomplish the impossible. It would occur to us instead to say: “I am too little; no, no, I cannot; I would like to live in my own way”, but nothing is impossible for God. The Gospel gives us this great confidence: if we say “yes” to Him, God will carry us and guide us. Let us give thanks to God for the great gift of His Incarnation, and let us pray that we, too, may be able to say: “Yes, every day I am Your servant, may Your will be done in me!” Amen!

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