

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Sermon Text: Luke 1:39-45

Theme: *“The beauty of Christmas”*

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Women in our culture, and increasingly men also, are all too often celebrated for what they look like, instead of who they are. Our televisions, movies and magazines are filled with advertising that promotes diet pills and plans, fitness programmes and any other gimmick to get people to look, smell and feel better. The yardstick that is put forward as being the ideal is that which magazines and Hollywood want you to believe. The problem with all of this superficiality that celebrates the lives of the young and beautiful is that it keeps us from recognizing true beauty.

In today’s gospel reading we meet two women. Luke never considers it necessary to describe what they look like. He pays no attention to their sense of fashion. Nevertheless, he shows them for what they are: truly beautiful women.

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

Chosen to be our Lord’s mother

The first of these two women was quite young, most likely a teenager and her name was Mary. According to the custom of the day, Mary was engaged to an older man, a carpenter by the name of Joseph. You know the story well, of how she found herself to be with child, not by Joseph but through miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit. Mary, a virgin had been chosen to be the mother of our Lord and she received the news with beautiful humility, saying, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.” (Lk 1:38)

The angel then told Mary that her cousin Elizabeth would also bear a child. It is likely the young Mary thought Elizabeth would be a good mentor as she prepared for the difficult task of motherhood. So, bursting with youthful energy, Mary hurried up into the hill country to visit with Elizabeth and to tell her the good news.

Elizabeth was married to Zechariah, a distinguished priest who served in the temple. Unlike Mary, she was advanced in age but she was no less beautiful. Luke tells us that she was a righteous woman, blameless in all her ways. As such, she exhibited a true beauty of character, the kind of beauty that is more precious than jewels.

Now, as soon as Mary entered Elizabeth’s house, she excitedly told Elizabeth all that had happened: about the angel, about the conception by the Holy Spirit, and about the child whom she would call Jesus, which means, “The Lord saves.” Yes, she had good news in every sense of the word. And at this greeting, how did Elizabeth react? Was she perhaps a little jealous that Mary’s news was greater than her own? Was she upset that this young girl, and not she, would give birth to the Saviour? After all, Elizabeth was married to a respected priest who served in the temple. Mary, on the other hand, was only a simple girl, set to marry a simple carpenter. No. There was no jealousy in this beautiful woman. In fact, she was honoured, saying, “Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (v 43). At Mary’s good news, Elizabeth’s heart was gladdened, and she exclaimed, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (v 42).

Joined together in joy

Then amazingly, Elizabeth’s child got into the act as she added, “For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy” (v 44). In holy joy, John the Baptist was already pointing to the Lamb of God, who would take away the sin of the world. Yes, here is a picture of infant faith and a vivid reminder of why we baptize infants. The child of Elizabeth was already looking forward to what the child of Mary would accomplish. The infant John was rejoicing that our Lord had become a little babe, just like him.

In today’s Gospel we see that human life in all of its stages has been sanctified and touched by the beauty of our beautiful Saviour. Yes, there is beauty in the unborn child. Beauty in the godly mother. Beauty in the one who grows older in the wisdom of the Lord. All human life is made beautiful by the Lord through whom the world was created, by whose death the world is redeemed, and by whose incarnation the world is sanctified.

Compare this beautiful biblical scene with the ugliness of sin. The ugliness of sin is constantly looking admiringly in the mirror, without a thought for others. The world says, “A woman should not have to carry a child that she doesn’t want, especially if it (i.e., the child) gets in the way of her own plans, her own career.” In the ugliness of sin, life is all about “me, myself, and I.” So often we are tempted to judge others by how useful they are to us. And watch out to anyone who gets in our way—whether that be an inconvenient child, a person suffering

with a handicap, or an elderly person who requires “too much” of our care, attention, and love. So goes the ugliness of sin and vanity.

How much better is it for us to ponder Luke’s beautiful scene. Here we see a wonderful affirmation of life. Here we see beautiful faith as it is given by God. Remember Mary. At hearing that she would be the mother of our Lord, Mary did not succumb to vanity or engage in empty boasting. Instead of self-promotion or self-fulfilment Mary finds herself raised and graced by what the Lord has done. She finds her fulfilment in what the Lord has promised. Yes, Mary’s beauty is in her humility and trust. In response to the angel’s word, she said simply, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (v 38).

This was not blind obedience or passive ignorance. No, Mary trusted in the Lord because she knew that he is, in fact, trustworthy. Throughout the ages, our Lord had kept his promises. He has a long history of raising the lowly and showing kindness to the poor. Mary knew that through her child, God would do great things.

And so in great joy, Mary began to sing her wonderful song which we now call the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed” (vv 46–48). In her Son, she would see the proud scattered and the mighty knocked off their thrones. In her Son, she could see the humble exalted and the hungry filled with good things. In her Son, she could see the salvation of Israel and her own exaltation as well.

The beauty of Christmas

Maybe that’s the point of all of this. Mary had the right point of view. Society teaches young people to look in the mirror and judge themselves by appearance. But what’s the result? Either vanity or despair because, finally, there’s nothing that lasts there. Mary and Elizabeth, on the other hand, were women of substance. They did not vainly look in the mirror but were happy for each other, and more important, they put their focus on Christ. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was most excited by the fact that Mary would give birth to the Saviour. And because of that, Elizabeth could rejoice with Mary, without any sense of jealousy. Nor was Mary vain. Rather than look at the mirror of her own loveliness, she looked at what God had done for her and saw the One who would come forth and save her. Yes, the attention of both Elizabeth and Mary was on our Lord.

Because they were focusing on Christ, they were beautiful women. They looked into the face of the Lord and reflected his beauty.

So, what does this all mean for us in our world of superficiality and vanity? During this season of Advent, take some time out of busy schedules to reflect once more on what it’s all about. Look beyond the tinsel and Christmas lights, to fix your eyes on the Christ Child, finding your glory in the cross that he would take up on our behalf.

This includes teaching our children the countercultural values that Mary sang about in her Magnificat. Earthly beauty is a gift from God. And hair products and cosmetics are fine. But earthly beauty fades. So, move away from the vanity of the mirror and the ugliness of pride. Better to adorn ourselves with Christ and to put on his Spirit of holiness. We do better to place Christ before our eyes and before the eyes of our daughters and sons.

Jesus could have chosen to be born in beautiful Jerusalem, or, for that matter, in glorious Rome. Instead, he chose to be born in lowly Bethlehem, least among the cities of Judah. He could have chosen to enter into the family of the high priest or be born into the imperial family of Emperor Augustus, but instead he chose to be born into the family of a carpenter, with a poor young maiden as his mother. I have no doubt that Mary was beautiful and that she had a beautiful child. But much more important, he became a beautiful Saviour, willingly bearing the scars and nail marks. As Isaiah would say of him: “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Is 53:2). Ah, but that’s true beauty! As he endures the ugliness of the cross, we see his truly beautiful heart!

No, our Lord did not choose to enter into some perfect and ideal world. He chose, instead, to enter our world, with all of its flaws and blemishes. Why? Because he loves us, with all of our flaws and blemishes. Indeed, he comes to wash away the blemish of our sins. He presents us, his Church, as his Bride, clothed in baptismal splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that we might be holy, without blemish. Now this is true beauty, the real beauty of Christmas.

And the peace of God that passes all understanding, keep guard over your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.