

Commentary to the 4th Sunday of Advent - Year C

RICH IN THEIR POVERTY

"Answer me, for I am poor" (Ps 86:1), so prays the Psalmist. It surprises the reason he thinks to convince God to intervene on his behalf: I am poor. To gain access to the palaces of the sovereigns, of the rulers of this world, solid recommendations are necessary, titles of merit must be exhibited, credentials and merits are required. It is not like this with God: the only certificate needed to be received in audience is the state of poverty.



His sympathies are with the little ones, the defenseless, the derelict. He, "the father of orphans and defender of widows" (Ps 68:6), prefers those who count for nothing, those who are despicable in people's eyes. "The Lord has chosen you," Moses tells the Israelites, "not because you are more numerous than all the other peoples (you are, in fact, the smallest of all peoples), but because the Lord loves you" (Deut 7:7-8).

"The thoughts of the Lord are not our thoughts, and his ways are not our ways" (Is 55:8), which is why they are difficult to understand. Gideon, called to perform an arduous task, objects in amazement: "Oh, Lord! How shall I deliver Israel? My family is the darkest in Manasseh, and I am the most insignificant in my father's house!" (Jdg 6:15).

Today's readings present us with a series of situations and minor characters in whom God has worked wonders. They are an invitation to recognize—as Mary did—our poverty and to dispose of ourselves to welcome the work of salvation that the Lord comes to accomplish.

To internalize the message, we will repeat: "Great things will the Lord do for the poor who trust in him."

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First Reading: Micah 5:1-4a

Thus says the Lord: You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you

shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times. Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time when she who is to give birth has borne, and the rest of his kindred shall return to the children of Israel. He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the Lord, in the majestic name of the Lord, his God; and they shall remain, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace. —The Word of the Lord.

At the time of Micah, the political, social, and economic situation in Israel is dire. Everywhere there are signs of violence, in the courts the judges allow themselves to be corrupted by gifts, the priests and prophets think only of accumulating money, among the people an able and overbearing minority has taken over all the fields and exploits the poor as laborers, as poorly paid seasonal workers. Hezekiah is a good man, but he has minimal governing skills; times are too complicated for a weakling like him.

In this complicated situation, Micah pronounces his prophecy: from the small, insignificant village of Bethlehem, from the ancient family of Ephrathah is about to be born "the ruler of Israel" (v. 1).

For three hundred years, the descendants of David have held power, but they have done nothing but make disasters; they have oppressed the people and reduced them to hunger. What was the cause of their mistakes? First, pride, then the conviction that they could do without the Lord. They forgot that they did not become kings by their abilities, they did not take the throne by their strength, but God transformed a humble shepherd into a great ruler.

Now—says the prophet—from the human point of view, the situation is hopeless, but the Lord is about to intervene, "she who is to give birth will give birth" (v. 2), and a new kingdom will begin from the descendants of David. To whom was Micah referring? He was certainly thinking of a king of the Davidic dynasty. But God—as he is wont to do—fulfills his promises beyond all human expectations. He let another seven hundred years pass, and from a woman, Mary, he gave birth to the announced son of David.

This son—Jesus—was not presumptuous and arrogant like his ancestors, and he brought to fulfillment what is written in the second part of the reading (vv. 3-4a): he was the good shepherd who led the people 'with the strength of the Lord.' He initiated the new world in which people can dwell safely in their homes, the world in which peace reigns everywhere, to the ends of the earth.

At this point, however, there arises in us, spontaneously, the objection that already the rabbis of the first centuries addressed to Christians: Where is the peace that reaches all the ends of the earth? Someone will show us this new world—they said—and we will believe in Jesus. Christians have only one possibility to answer this provocative question, to indicate some concrete place where this peace has come with the advent of the Lord: their family, their community, or at least their heart.

Second Reading: Hebrews 10:5-10

Brothers and sisters: When Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight. Then I said, 'As is written of me in the scroll, behold, I come to do your will, O God.'"

First he says, "Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings, you neither desired nor delighted

in.” These are offered according to the law. Then he says, “Behold, I come to do your will.” He takes away the first to establish the second. By this “will,” we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. —The Word of the Lord.

People who recovered from a severe illness, who escaped from some danger, who felt impure and needed to ask forgiveness for their sins, went to the temple, bought a kid goat, gave it to the priest, and he offered it as a sacrifice to God. The Old Testament approves and regulates these manifestations of religiosity. Still, the prophets did not show too much sympathy for these practices because, generally, they were reduced to pure external gestures to which an authentic conversion of heart did not correspond.

In the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews, which is proposed today, we find the words of a man who in the temple thanks God for having been delivered from a mortal illness. He says: I know, Lord, that you do not delight in the fragrance of incense or in the smoke of the meat of the lambs sacrificed on the altar; so I make you another promise: I will always do your will; this I know is pleasing to you (vv. 5-7).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews says that Christ fulfilled in himself the words of this Psalm. He did not offer any material sacrifice but said to the Father, "Behold I come to do your will." Thus, he put an end to the ancient offerings in the temple and ushered in the new times (v. 8-10).

Behold, I come—Christ says in this Advent season—not to ask you for songs, prayers, incense, solemn religious ceremonies, but to involve you in my project, to communicate my Spirit that will lead you to do, as I have done, the will of the Father.

Gospel: Luke 1:39-48

Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.” —The Gospel of the Lord.

If we interpret this account as a news piece, we wonder why Luke wrote it. Indeed, the gesture of Mary who goes to congratulate her cousin who has received from God the longed-for gift of motherhood is courteous, but it is still a marginal episode; it does not constitute a significant stage in the life of Jesus and does not represent an important point of reference for our faith.

A second observation: some details of this story are at least strange. A strong emotion—mothers assure us—causes sensations even in the fetus and can stimulate some of its movements, but how could it be established that it was a jolt of joy? Nor is it easy to explain Mary's haste (v. 39) to visit Elizabeth in her sixth month of pregnancy. It is usually said that she rushed to help her cousin. But this is an

unconvincing explanation: how could a twelve-year-old girl (this was the age that Mary must have been) presume to take the place of mature and experienced friends and relatives that Elizabeth certainly had in Ain Karim? It is not clear why she left after three months (Lk 1:56), that is precisely at the time of the birth when her cousin would have needed more assistance.

A third observation—and it is the most important one—Is that Mary and Elizabeth, instead of conversing simply, as happens between friends, exchange phrases carefully chosen from the Bible, alluding to episodes and characters from the Old Testament with a fineness and competence that is truly impressive. More than a chat between women of the people, it seems to be a dialogue between two biblical scholars and well-prepared biblical scholars.

Let us pay attention: the Gospel is not a collection of information, written to satisfy curiosity, but it is a text of catechesis. It aims to nourish the disciple's faith and wants to make us understand who Jesus is, to whom we are called to give our adherence. To grasp the message, it is always necessary to keep in mind the language used in the time it was written and pay close attention to the references, sometimes explicit, other times a bit veiled, to the Old Testament.

After this introduction, let's try to understand what Luke wants to teach us in today's passage. Let us begin with the apparently banal and superfluous note with which the story begins: "As soon as Mary entered the house of Zechariah, she greeted Elizabeth" (v. 40). Had it been the usual 'good morning!' the evangelist would not have underlined it. If he emphasizes it, it means that this greeting is significant for him, and in the following verse, he recalls it again: "When she heard the greeting, the Baptist leaped for joy."

The Jews of that time and those of today, when they meet, make only one wish: Shalom - Peace. Peace indicates the accumulation of goods that God has promised to his people and that must be realized at the coming of the Messiah: "In his days," said the Psalmist, "justice will flourish and peace will abound, until the moon is extinguished" (Ps 72:7). The Messiah is called by the prophet Isaiah the "prince of peace" (Is 9:5).

On Mary's lips, the word peace is a solemn proclamation: the announcement that the awaited Messiah has come into the world and with him has begun the kingdom of peace of which the prophets spoke. Like Mary on the mountains of Judea, like the angels who in Bethlehem sang: "Peace on earth to those whom God loves" (Lk 2:14), today Christ's disciples speak only words of peace. "Into whatever house you enter," Jesus recommended, "first say, 'Peace be to this house'" (Lk 10:5).

Elizabeth's words to Mary: "Blessed are you among women!" are not original. In the Old Testament, two women are greeted similarly: Jael (Jdg 5:24) and Judith (Jdt 13:18). What had they done that was extraordinary? They had succeeded (an unprecedented feat for women!) in annihilating the oppressors of their people. The Bible does not record these stories to endorse war, but only to show, using examples understandable to the mentality of the time, how God is accustomed to performing marvelous deeds using fragile and unsuitable instruments.

Applying this exact phrase to Mary, Luke affirms that she too belongs to the category of weak and poor instruments with which God is used to carrying out his works of salvation. Through Mary, he has realized the most extraordinary event in history: he has given his son to people.

Elizabeth continues: "To what do I owe that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (v. 43). This phrase is also copied from the Old Testament. It was pronounced by David on a very solemn occasion when the ark of the covenant was brought to Jerusalem, in which the Lord was believed to be present. In receiving it, the king exclaimed, "How shall the ark of the Lord come to me?" (2 Sam 6:9).

Other significant details place Mary's visit in parallel with the episode of the ark of the covenant: both Mary and the ark remain three months in a house in Judea. The ark is received with dances, shouts of joy, songs of celebration and is a source of blessings for the family that welcomes it (2 Sam 6:10-11) and Mary, entering the house of Zechariah, makes little John (representing all the people of the Old Testament who rejoice for the coming of the Messiah) jump for joy. It is thus quite evident that Luke intends to present Mary as the new ark of the covenant. Since God has chosen to become man, he no longer dwells in stone buildings, a temple, or a sacred place, but the womb of a woman. Mary's son is the Lord himself.

Wherever Mary—the new ark of the covenant—arrives, there is an explosion of joy: the Baptist leaps for joy (v. 41), Elizabeth cries out her joy at having been visited by the Lord (v. 42), the poor exult because the moment of their liberation has arrived (vv. 46-48). It is the joy that characterizes the messianic times. Zechariah will experience it when he blesses the Lord because "he has visited and redeemed his people" (Lk 1,68); it will be announced by the angel to the shepherds: "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which will be for all the people" (Lk 2:10). Simeon will rejoice when he takes the child in his arms and contemplates with his own eyes the "salvation prepared by God before all peoples, a light to enlighten the nations" (Lk 2:29-32). Welcoming the Lord who comes does not mean renouncing joy but opening wide the doors to true joy.

Mary is proclaimed blessed because "she believed in the fulfillment of the Lord's words" (v. 45). How many promises God has made through the mouths of his prophets! However, when these took a long time to be fulfilled, people began to doubt the faithfulness of the Lord. They thought they had misunderstood or been deceived. They began to trust their reasoning, their projects, their own choices, and they met with systematic failures. On the other hand, Mary is blessed because she trusted God; she cultivated the certainty that, despite all appearances to the contrary, the word of the Lord would be fulfilled.

Blessed is she who believed. This is the first beatitude we encounter in Luke's Gospel, and—note—it is formulated in the third person (not: Blessed are you...). This indicates that the beatitude is not reserved for Mary but should be extended to all those who trust the word of the Lord. In John's Gospel, this same beatitude is found at the end. The Risen One addresses it to Thomas: "Blessed are those who, though they have not seen, will believe" (Jn 20:29). Authentic faith, which Mary gives proof, does not need visions, demonstrations, or verifications. It is based on listening to the Word and is manifested in unconditional adherence to this Word.

It is not easy to believe, especially when asked to go against 'common sense.' It takes a lot of courage to believe that God's promises to the peacemakers, to the non-violent, to those who turn the other cheek, to those who do not take revenge, to those who give their lives out of love will be fulfilled. Mary shows that the Lord's words are worth trusting, always. "Blessed are those who—as she did—hear the word of God and keep it" (Lk 11:28).

The Gospel passage concludes with the first verses of the hymn of praise to the Lord that Luke placed on Mary's lips. Mary is the first to realize the wonders worked by the Lord and to sing them. It all begins with the gaze that God turns to her, completely different from that of people. People look towards those who can enrich them. God turns his eyes on those who count for nothing, despised, unproductive, and in painful conditions. Judith prayed to him in this way: "You are the God of the humble, you are the rescuer of the derelict, the refuge of the weak, the protector of the disheartened, the savior of the desperate" (Jdt 9:11).

Mary understood that God's gaze is not attracted by merits, spiritual perfection, but by human need. She placed herself among the poor and became the interpreter of their feelings of gratitude.

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Fernando Armellini