

Fourth Sunday of Advent B - "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you"

December 20, 2020.

I got a phone call at my office one lunch time in September 2003, "Mr. Chan, congratulations. You won a free VIP vacation trip for two to Italy with a \$1000 spending money." My immediate reaction "Salesman again", "I am not interested." and hang up, Few seconds later, the phone rang again. "Are you Mr Raymond Chan? Did you sign up for online banking recently?" I responded "Yes." "It's the Customer Service and you did win the Grand Prize. We will call you later for more details." I called my wife about the wonderful news but still perplexed. We took the free one week's VIP Italy vacation trip, touring Rome, Florence and Venice May 2004. It was wonderful!!! I was glad that I answered the call and said "Yes".

We always celebrate some aspect of **Annunciation** on the Fourth Sunday of Advent every year: We hear a different part of the great story involving the Angel Gabriel, Joseph, Mary and her cousin Elizabeth (Year A Matthew 1:18-25, Year B Luke 1:26-38, Year C Luke 1:39-45). And all of this foretells **the imminent birth of the Saviour**. As we listen to the story, we may wonder: **Why Mary for the mother of God?** Same as when the guy called me about winning the Grand Prize, why me? Mary was apparently an ordinary person living in a town of Galilee called Nazareth. She was not rich or famous, an unlikely representative of humankind to give birth to the saviour. But God chose her. The flesh that became Jesus came from the body of one who was just like us, ordinary and vulnerable.

Mary's ordinariness allowed God to make it absolutely clear that Jesus was truly and fully human. No one could say that Jesus only appeared to be truly human but he was not like us in every aspect of our bodies. No one could say he was different because he was born to a wealthy or royal family. What we know of Mary is little. Yet we know of **her humility and her faith and her obedience to God. She was a person who was completely herself.** Besides, Mary was just engaged to a carpenter with a steady income and honest work. And her marriage to Joseph probably represented a great improvement in her social status. She seems to have a well-planned ordinary future. But then along came Gabriel who greeted her with these astonishing words: **"Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you"** This Archangel Gabriel told Mary she is the favoured one of God. Yes, in this Sunday's story (Luke 1:26-38), Luke tells us that **"She was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."** **"How can this be?"** Remember in John 1:46, Nathanael said, **"Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"** It was perhaps the equivalent of the worst slums of our age, a place from which no one expected much of anything. If we were Mary, surely we would feel the same: perplexed and bewildered. She was wholly content to be who and what she was, and to do what God gave her to do. She was open to what the angel had to say to her but honest enough to question how she could possibly conceive and bear a son. Yet she was obedient and did what she was told. Her whole life was so centred on God that there was no hesitation in accepting God's will for her even though the future was unknown. She said in reply to God: **"Here am I, the servant of the lord; let it be with me according to your word."** (Luke 1:38) So we can well understand why God chose one so young and inexperienced to be the mother of the Lord. **Mary was fresh enough in her humanity to embrace an accepting attitude so that she could hear and heed the word of God's angel.** In addition, Mary's faith was uncomplicated and pure enough for her to believe in miracles.

We Christians know by faith that **"Nothing will be impossible with God."** (Luke 1:37) **And all of us are invited to accept our call to vocation, but will we proclaim like Mary, "Here am I, the servant of God." ?** Mary had courage. She was willing to stand up to

whatever gossip or rejection might come her way because she was pregnant and not married. She would be subjected to the harsh, unfair and potentially deadly first century Jewish law of her day. In a way, Mary's unconditional "Yes" helps us understand that as God chose her, he chooses us too in our common-ness and ordinariness to be the continuing instruments of his flesh. **She becomes our mother, too, as we live this life together as the body of Christ, in the same plainness of humanity that was made Godly by Christ's sharing it.**

Let's be ready to let go and take the plunge, like Mary – putting our total trust in God and responding to God's messenger with the only words we can utter that help carry out the plan of salvation: "**Let it be.**" This very text reminds us that God loves us, all of us. God has a message for each one of us. We are – all of us – the favoured ones of God. And God has a plan for each and every one of us: ***to help bring down the powerful from their thrones, and lift up the lowly; to fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty*** (Luke 1:46-55), words from the **Canticle of Mary (the Magnificat)** that we pray every evening in the Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hour). And that is what follows immediately after this Sunday's story in Luke's gospel.

We are all called to be the bearers of the Christ in our bodies, the only place where he may live on this earth. **We are the body of Christ's when we let Christ dwell within us, and when we share Christ with others, God will be with us always.** By opening our lives to Christ, we, like Mary, are blessed among all men and women. By sharing Christ, we, like Mary, take part in the greatest, most wonderful thing the world has ever known. As Christmas Day rapidly approaches, are we ready to receive the reality of God within us? Are we ready to put the Christ within us to work, to love God and our neighbours as ourselves? Let us, like Mary, be willing to bear Christ into our hearts and into our world. God did not keep Mary out of Christmas - neither must we. **A young woman is with child, and shall bear a son, and shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David and he shall be Emmanuel" – God with us.**" For nothing will be impossible with God. And this great Good News begins anew this season by putting our faith in mere words. This Christmas, may we hear the words of the angel and know in our hearts that they are intended for each and every one of us: "**Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you.**"