

Homily

Advent 4

Sunday 20th December, 2009.

Mass Readings: Micah 5:1-4; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-44.

Imagine for a moment that you're the priest responsible for marriage preparation in a parish, and a young couple make an appointment to come and see you to make the arrangements for their wedding. You make a date to see them and they dutifully turn up on time. It's great to see a couple so obviously in love with each other and excited about sharing their future together. You have only one slight concern and that is that they are still quite young. She is only seventeen and he has only just turned twenty. But their enthusiasm and seriousness about their future together are obvious and that puts everything into a positive context. It all goes very well and you put dates in the diary for seeing them further.

Two weeks later you get a telephone call from the young man, late at night. He sounds terrible on the phone and finds it hard to talk and breaks down once or twice he's so upset. He asks to come and see you as soon as possible. He comes the next day, plonks himself down in the chair and just cries and cries. Eventually he manages to tell you that his girlfriend is pregnant. He struggles to express their shared sense of common values, that they don't live together, they're strongly religious, and vows that he has never slept with her so the child is certainly not his. He's so angry and sad, and overwhelmed with a sense of being betrayed.

"How could she do this to me? We kept nothing from each other. Wasn't I good enough for her? What the hell am I going to tell my parents? My Dad, he'll go crazy, he'll murder whoever the father is. What am I going to say to my friends, we're well on to preparing the whole marriage thing for heaven's sake!"

He looks totally destroyed.

He says: “To make it worse she tells me she doesn’t quite know who the father is – that God is the father. What the hell’s that supposed to mean? Was she drunk when some guy dragged her off somewhere. I feel such an idiot. She said a stranger came and told her that the child would be God’s Son – he sounds like a complete nutter to me whoever he was. How could she do this to me?”

It comes back to you, your concern about their age. After a while he manages to calm down and you try and find something positive to leave him with. You make a date to see him at the end of the week. Before then he phones again and asks if he can come along to chat about something else that’s bothering him. He turns up and says that he has had this dream that keeps nagging at him, and although it’s weird there’s something really consoling in it. When he woke up he says that he actually felt good, the first time in days. In the dream he met the same person who had been to his girlfriend to tell her about the baby. At the beginning he says he felt furious and although the guy looked much bigger and tougher than him he wanted to jump up and hit him but he couldn’t move. Something about him said he just had to be listened to. The person in the dream told him to stay with his girlfriend, to marry her, and that everything would be fine. Then he woke up.

He’s in a better place in himself so you make an appointment for the two of them to come after a couple of days. The appointment time arrives but he comes on his own. He’s says he’s back to square one. You ask where his girlfriend is and he says that she’s just gone off to visit relatives up north somewhere in the highlands. “She’s pregnant for heaven’s sake, I’m all confused again. People say I should press her to seek a termination, but that’s impossible. They say I should dump her, that she’s only trouble, that she’ll bring nothing but worry, that she’s making an idiot of me. But then that dream comes back to me.” OK – what are you going to say to him?

When we read these passages in the gospel texts concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Mary and Joseph, it would be easy to get the impression that they had a smooth understanding of the Spirit’s work in them. We are deeply inculturated with their peaceful, angelic, Christmas card profiles, their composed stained glass iconography. We can get the impression that all the gospel characters, sometimes including Jesus Himself, knew what was happening in and around them – but often they didn’t. We got a sharp reminder of that last week with that sad and desperate message from John the Baptist in prison, via two of his disciples, to Jesus. “*Are you the One who is to come or should we look for another?*” Now John is calling into question the whole of his life’s work. He feels totally abandoned. If Jesus is the Messiah, the One to come and set Israel free, how come he, John, ends up in

jail, threatened with death, because the King's trollop of a wife has thrown a tantrum.? Are you the One? Perhaps I was wrong all the time. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* None of us can ever fathom the depth of that particular feeling of abandonment felt by Jesus on the cross.

These people that we meet in the gospel birth narratives groped in the darkness of faith. Mary, we are told, was deeply disturbed by the visit of the Archangel. Those two words, 'deeply disturbed' carry a whole weight of confusion, anxiety and incomprehension. She wasn't just momentarily disturbed but often disturbed. Jesus frequently disturbed her – all her life. There was an occasion you remember, recalled in the gospel of Mark, when she and other family friends went to retrieve Him because they thought He'd gone crazy. Joseph's confusion is clearly there in the text, behind the lines. Zechariah asks the Archangel Gabriel for proof of his message before he'll believe it. He's struck dumb by Gabriel instead, for doubting. The gospel characters were not super human beings otherwise they'd have nothing to say to us. They grappled with their faith, they struggled on in doubt and fear and loneliness. This is why they are so important, so deep in their understanding of whatever we are going through, so diligent in their care for us, so powerful in their intercession, such great models and patrons of the Church. Like with us, life often hurt. They lived on visions and dreams. Can you imagine anything more precarious?

What does this say to me? It says to me that when I'm grappling with something in my life, whatever it is, and especially if I'm grappling with something because of God, whether it's my struggle with the ideals of the gospel, with the demands of my vocation, with the seemingly endless repetition of my sins, His apparent lack of response to my prayers, His apparent absence in the face of so much innocent suffering in the lives of others, the uncertainties over my future – whatever it is, then I'm in good company. Mary and Joseph would understand, so would all those we now hail as saints and heroes. What does Christmas say – in a word? It says that God is not up there somewhere! Neither is He asleep, deaf, or far away. It may not feel like it, and it may not be pleasant, but God is working His purpose out in my life. He's not up there, He's in here. In the end Joseph and Mary trusted in the promises made to them, and we know all the goodness and grace that flowed from their courage and fidelity. May you and I do the same. Mary and Joseph, John the Baptist, Elizabeth and Zechariah, the Wise Men and the shepherds – inspire us, each one of us to believe in the promises made to us by the Lord. Let's think on that this week.

Here's a prayer by Thomas Merton, for the last week of Advent:

“My Lord God I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that my desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

I sense that Mary and Joseph would have prayed the same – on the way to Bethlehem.