

Homily for 4th Sunday of Advent 2017

A day early perhaps but Happy Xmas everyone! People get a bit upset about using “Xmas” instead of Christmas. Many Christians take this to mean that the secular world wants to get take Christ out of Christmas. For many I am sure that is true. But Xmas has a Christian origin. X or *Chi* is the Greek letter beginning the word “Christ”, meaning Messiah. It has long been used as a shorthand or secret sign of Christ. You may remember seeing it on some vestments as *XP*, *Chi Roe*, the first two Greek letters of Christ. So unwittingly even those who think they are dumbing down Christmas are in fact proclaiming him. Even if it is spelt Xmas it is always pronounced Christmas. More to the point though the recent attempt: “merry non-denominational seasonal festivity” makes the secular case clear.

May we, even if unwittingly, also proclaim the Gospel of Christ by our lives. Are you an Xmas person? What may seem very ordinary things we do can help bring Christ to the world. Your family by be getting together this week. For all intents and purposes it is seen as just that, a family party for the holidays and giving presents and so on. But you, for whom Mass attendance is a regular part of your life, the annual Christmas get together takes on a larger significance. We recognise that we are celebrating the promise of God to be with God’s people no matter what. Into our messy often dysfunctional world God is coming. Beyond our struggles, failures and differences, beyond all noses put out of joint, greater even than out best joys, God is love revealed in Jesus.

Today in the Liturgy we meet Mary visited by the Angel Gabriel. Mary is no shrinking violet. She challenged Gabriel who tells her she is to be the mother of the Son of the Most High. How can this come about? Mary’s sinlessness, free from original sin, which we honour does not mean that Mary was not a passionate woman. He *magnificat* is witness to that. She is passionate about God’s mercy for his people and for the poor. Her *magnificat* echos Jesus’ own Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. She like any mother and wife would have got irritated if Joseph left his tools lying about the house or walked his dirty boots through the house. She would have been subject to all the human foibles we suffer. She is definitely not a meek and mild subservient suburban housewife!

Mary is sinless not because she never felt angry or impatient or never needed to struggle with life. She was sinless because she never missed the point of her life. She was free to become fully the person God wanted her to be. That began with her “Yes, be it done unto me according to your word”. That wholehearted response was with her whole body mind and spirit. It is evidence of God’s graciousness too. To miss the point of one’s life, that is the real sin for all of us. God loves each one of us and wants us to have life to the full. To reject God’s offer of love is to lose ones purpose. We are created for love of God and neighbour as ourself.

All the other women in the Bible, like Hanna the mother of Samuel, prayed to God for a child. Mary did not ask for a child. God tells her she would be the mother of the Messiah. What an extraordinary thing for God to do! Mary does not seem to have had much choice in the matter. But she could have refused to allow it to happen. I am thinking of all those women who find themselves pregnant unintended for whatever reason. Even if it happens for the worst of reasons God can bring something good from it. It can bring about God’s plan in unexpected ways. Especially if the response is one of welcome and thankfulness, trusting in God’s goodness.

We gather again to celebrate Christmas tomorrow with the simplicity and humility of the shepherds who were astonished at what the angels told them. They were not looking for the Messiah. Once again God took the initiative and told them what was happening. We try to be in control of our life. But even with all our modern technology we easily forget our ultimate purpose. Christmas will remind us again that we have to enter into the silent night of Emmanuel, God is with us.

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