

A Welcome Visitor

In the name of him who is our peace with God, dear friends in Christ: Up until this point in our worship together during the Advent season, I've been trying to hold us back a bit ... trying to make sure that we not leap headlong into the joy of Christmastide until we've done the necessary spiritual preparations. That's always the temptation: to skip the serious introspection and painful self-examination that leads to sorrowful repentance and jump right ahead to "the good stuff". But what happens when you take that route is that you're compelled to keep up an artificially buoyant "Christmas high" for four or five weeks, so that by the time Christmas actually arrives you're tired of pretending to be happy and pretty much sick of the whole thing. When Christmas Day comes then, it's a relief because it's over – rather than, as it should be, the festive highpoint on which we celebrate with *genuine joy* and *grateful hearts* the gift of God's Son born to be the Savior of our fallen race. It's my sincere hope and prayer that by putting the brakes on things and asking you to make the proper preparations, your Christmas this year will be spiritually rewarding and very merry indeed.

But – and I know this will surprise some of you – even I'm not so foolish as to try to hold you back today. No, I think it's safe to say the holiday season is now fully upon us; so I won't make any effort to repress your joy. Go for it. Rejoice. Be glad. Celebrate your Redeemer's birth. You have my permission (as if you needed it). And I'm sure that an important part of your celebrations over the next couple of weeks will involve sharing the joy of the holidays with family and friends. I expect many of you will have out-of-town guests in your homes for festive meals and perhaps for a visit of a few days or more. You'll be able to enjoy the rare pleasure of their company, and you'll have the opportunity to express your love and concern for them by your gracious hospitality. It's always nice to be able to serve the people you care for in such ways.

Of course, there's no denying that some guests are more welcome than others. Some can be quite exasperating. No one likes playing host to a guest who is demanding, pushy, and highly critical of every little thing – and there's always one or more in every group. They don't like your Christmas traditions, or the way you cook, decorate your home, raise your kids, and just about anything else you can name. They have strong opinions about everything, and they let you know that unless you share their point of view, you don't quite measure up – which you obviously don't; that's why they feel it's their duty to point out your innumerable flaws. I'm willing to bet that you know first hand the kind of guest I'm talking about. Yes? Then I think you'll understand when I say that as important as it is to be a good host, it may be even more important to make sure you are a welcome visitor when someone else is serving as host to you. If Christian hospitality is a virtue, and it is, maybe it's just as much or even more a virtue to be a good guest – the kind of visitor who is appreciative, open-minded, helpful ... the kind of visitor who is a joy to entertain ... and who, perhaps above all else, knows that when paying a visit it is the height of good manners to know when to leave.

All of which leads me into today's Gospel lesson in which the Virgin Mary is paying a very welcome visit to her kinswoman Elizabeth. What their relationship is exactly, we don't know. The Scriptures do not tell us. She could be a cousin, or maybe even an aunt, it's not clear. What we do know is that Elizabeth is quite a bit older than

Mary. She's the wife of an elderly priest named Zechariah with whom she has lived the greater share of a lifetime in a village in the hill country of Judea. And while we have every reason to believe that the two of them loved each other dearly and were quite happy in their marriage, still, a dark cloud hung over their union because Elizabeth had proven unable to conceive. That's a deeply disappointing burden for any couple that longs for children; but in their culture it was especially grievous because it would have been interpreted as a sign of God's disfavor. So to the pain of having arms aching to hold a child of their own, there was added the feeling of humiliation and the silent condemnation of the community – which unfortunately would have fallen more heavily on Elizabeth. Her husband was a priest, after all, and highly respected. He would have been considered above reproach. The assumption most people would make is that if there's a problem – if God indeed is displeased with one of them – it's got to be with her rather than him. These circumstances would have made Elizabeth's life very hard, bitter, and lonely.

But Mary has not come visiting Elizabeth in order to cheer her up from her gloom, for things have changed very much for the better in Elizabeth's life. It happened some eight months back when her husband was serving his annual two-week rotation at the Temple in Jerusalem. Toward the end of his time of duty, he'd been chosen by lot to enter into the Temple's Holy Place, there to offer the prayers of the nation at the time of the evening sacrifice. It was a rare privilege, one that over the long course of his career he'd only performed a handful of times. Considering his age, it would probably be his last opportunity. But something remarkable happened to him while he stood praying before the altar of incense. The angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that the most ardent prayer of the people of Israel was now being answered: the Lord had decided that it was time to send the Savior into the world. This was incredibly good news to Zechariah; but there was more, and it touched him and his wife personally. They were to have the honor of being the parents of the Messiah's forerunner – the one whom the prophets Isaiah and Malachi had said would go before the Lord to prepare his way. This should too have been good news to the old priest. The trouble was that after all the years of disappointment and the fact that both he and Elizabeth were at that age when most people are enjoying the arrival of their grandchildren, it didn't seem to be a very likely thing to happen. Zechariah doubted that it was possible and told the angel as much. He asked for a sign – as if having an angel appear and talk to him were not sign enough. It was a mistake. For disbelieving God's Word to him, this priest whose job it was to proclaim God's Word and promises, was struck mute. That was his sign. He was effectively told since you don't believe the words of God you teach, you won't say anything until his Word is fulfilled.

And fulfilled it was. Not long after his return home, Elizabeth conceived the child whom we know as John the Baptist. So, it happens that Mary was not the first welcome visitor in their home; John was. And what joy he must have brought to his parents even in these months before his birth. The hope they'd long given up on was becoming a reality. Elizabeth's disgrace was lifted. The deepest desire of their hearts was about to be granted. And add to their delight the knowledge that their child was to play an important role in God's plan of salvation ... it all must have been truly overwhelming.

Still, there was a lot to do. Imagine an older childless couple suddenly expecting a baby. I mean, people tend to get pretty set in their ways as they mature. I think that's why the Lord usually gives children to young adults: they're quite a bit more flexible, and as a rule they have more energy. So, put yourself in Elizabeth's sandals. Men being

men, I'm sure that Zechariah buried himself in his work and told her, "You take care of it. I don't know anything about getting ready for a baby." Of course, Elizabeth is thinking pretty much the same thing. "What do I know about it?" Usually a first-time expectant mother can rely on older relatives like her mother and her aunts to provide helpful hints and assistance. But to whom could Elizabeth turn? Her older female relatives were all gone, and due to her barrenness, she'd doubtless been held at arm's length – the object of scorn and ridicule to the women of her age and younger who lived in the village. She couldn't rely on any support from them.

That's why I'm sure that Mary's arrival was truly a blessing; just the help Elizabeth needed to put things in order, make the necessary preparations, and help with all the cooking, cleaning, and other housekeeping duties during the difficult last trimester of her pregnancy. Mary would have been a very welcome visitor indeed. And I think that's a key to understanding this text. Mary hasn't come expecting to be waited upon. She has come to serve. Though she is a guest in Elizabeth's home, she has come to perform the duties of a host.

And that makes Mary very much like the other welcome visitor in this story – a visitor who is unseen – *unfelt* even at this point; but who nevertheless the entire story revolves around. You see, this story takes place a very short time after Mary received a rather startling visit from the same angel Gabriel who spoke to Zechariah. And if his message to Zechariah was hard to believe, you can well imagine what Mary must have been thinking when she was told that she would conceive the Christ child and yet remain a virgin. "How can this be?" she asked in astonishment. The angel told her that with God all things are possible. And for confirmation of it, he told her of Elizabeth's unlikely pregnancy, now in its sixth month. Unlike Zechariah who doubted, Mary received the angel's wondrous message in faith saying, "Behold, I am the Lord's handmaiden. Let it be to me as you have said." So, saying, Mary became the earthly mother and the gracious host to the most distinguished visitor this world has ever known – a visitor who himself came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many.

Elizabeth, for her part, finds it all rather remarkable. When Mary first shows up at her home, she is amazed at the honor she has been paid that someone so special – the mother of the Lord, no less – should condescend to pay her a visit. The sense of her comment is, "I'm unworthy of that you should be here under my roof." But Mary, like the child she bears, is not here to be treated as royalty and heaped with honor. She's come to humbly serve. In fact, there's something particularly ironic here in that Mary has come to help prepare the way for the child who will prepare the way for hers.

And this, I think, is the best application of this story for us. Throughout the season of Advent, we've been talking about preparing our hearts and minds to receive once again the mystery of God's Son visiting this earth as our brother in flesh and blood. Clearly, we are not worthy of the honor of his visit, and yet he comes to make his dwelling with us – to be our guest, yes; but even more to be our host. He comes to humbly serve us in the way we need it the most. He comes to give his body and blood as the atoning sacrifice for our sin on the cross.

And like it does for the people in this story, his coming changes things for the better. He comes to create faith where there is doubt. He comes to bring new life to where there is only death and decay. He comes to cleanse us from the filth of our sin. He comes to feed us with living bread from heaven. He comes to bring joy to where

there is sadness. He comes to fill to overflowing hearts that are turned inward and empty. And he comes to change us with his love and forgiveness so that we, his welcome guests, might learn to humbly serve, love, and forgive one another.

Not just at Christmas, but at all times. I mentioned before that a good visitor knows when to leave. That's something we never want Christ our Lord to do. Rather, as we sing in the old carol, we invite him in with the words, "Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today". Come. Stay. And never depart. Make our hearts your home, and let us be the welcome and grateful guests at your table from whence all blessings flow. Grant this to us Lord, now and always. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!