

Fourth Week of Advent

December 20, 2015

Our Gospel reading today is about a party. We might even call it the First Christmas Party. And it wasn't very big.

There were just two women there, both celebrating their rather strange pregnancies. Elizabeth was old, until recently thought to be sterile. Mary was a virgin, half girl and half woman, who was carrying a child resulting from the most miraculous of all pregnancies. Neither one of them lived with anywhere near the level of comforts we have. Yet we find in today's Gospel we find them filled with excitement.

Now, anytime we hear Scripture read at Mass or in our private reading, there are questions we should be asking ourselves as we reflect on the picture that's being placed before us. The biggest questions that we should be asking ourselves are:

What is God doing? Where is God in all of this? What's He trying to accomplish?

So as we ask those questions in the context of today's Gospel, we find that Mary and Elizabeth both saw themselves as willing instruments in the hands of God. They both knew that even though they didn't fully understand the "how" or the "what" of God's activities...they knew He was at work in their lives.

But do we know that works the very same way in our lives?

We have no difficulty in saying that we believe in God. But most of us are downright surprised when we discover God is *actually* accomplishing and advancing His plans by our willingness to cooperate with Him just as He did with Mary and Elizabeth.

Which is not to say that as a result of their willingness to say yes to God that their lives would be easy. Quite the contrary. Elizabeth might have lived long enough to hear about how her son's head was delivered on a platter to an obsessed king Herod.

And then there's Mary. Can you imagine the pain that she, too, had to endure as she watched her son die in tortured agony?

Today is the fourth and final Sunday of Advent, the last before Christmas. Mary, Elizabeth, Joseph, shepherds, Wise Men, and all of the other characters in the scene are in front of us. God has come to them ... and in coming to them He has come to us.

So we ask those questions: "Where is God in all that's happening in my life?" "What is God *doing* in these things that are happening to me?" "What is God trying to *accomplish* in all of this?"

The answers to these questions, as we all know, aren't always that clear.

Back in the late 1800's John Henry Cardinal Newman was an Anglican priest who later became a Catholic priest and was later made a Cardinal of the Church by Pope Leo XIII. Early in his journey through life Newman wrestled with those same questions about what God was doing with his life. Newman wrote a prayer about that struggle and I want to share it with you now.

God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me, which He has not committed to another. I have my mission - I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught.

I shall do good, I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place while not intending it- if I do but keep His commandments. Therefore I will trust Him, whatever, wherever I am. I can never be thrown away.

If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain.

He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends; He may throw me among strangers.

He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me - still He knows what He is about.

When all is said and done we all struggle, no matter what our station in life may be, with questions about the meaning and purpose of our lives.

But whether or not we have all of the answers to our questions is not really important. What *is* important, and what is central to everything, is that we have faith, faith in which we place ourselves and our lives into the hands of God who loves us, knowing that, as Cardinal Newman said, God knows what He is about.