

4th Sunday of Advent

Year C

Mary's Child: The Prince Of Peace.

*From the least of the clans of Judah, from Mary his lowly handmaid,
God prepared a body for his Christ,
who comes to fill the world with his spirit of peace.*

(Reading: Micah 5: 1-4. Hebrews 10: 5-10. Luke 1: 39-44.)

To make a promise is, without exception, to put yourself in debt. And that is because it requires the other person to trust you until you can deliver on your promise, on your word.

Sometimes we promise too much, too quickly, and we soon learn that, try as we might, and with all the best will in the world, we just cannot deliver the goods. At the other extreme, we are sometimes so doubtful of our own capacity to keep our promises that we are afraid to actually make any. So, we live in the absence of promises. That particular fear is all well and good. But the invariable result is that we end up inadvertently imposing that 'absence' on other people, unconsciously causing them to do the same.

To believe a promise is an act of trust in the person who makes it. It is to live in expectation, holding fast to someone's word. And when promises are fulfilled, as occasionally they are, there is a deepening of the original trust, and our faith is reinforced.

If a person has a distinctly wobbly track-record on keeping their word, then we, understandably, tend to be rather more cautious about their sparkling, new promises, regardless of how 'heart-felt' they may seem. We may, as it were, file them away under a 'Long Shots' heading, and forget them, after all, none of us wants to leave ourselves open to, or conspire in, our own disappointments. Neither do we want to become embittered when things look 'uncertain', or when disappointment seems likely, sending out such accusing reminders as "But you promised".

And yet, we know that we cannot totally avoid promises since life, itself, comes to us as a promise. And so, trust has to be exercised in the midst of the real frailty within, and around, us. However, in all of this, when it comes to God's promises we feel hopeful, trusting, knowing that at least he will deliver.

In our first reading Micah announces the great promise of God, a promise that gives substance to the hope of the people and gives direction to their lives. At the end of the exile the faithful 'Remnant', return to rebuild their lives in the hope that God will keep his promise.

At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we are introduced to an elderly, married couple who live on that same hope. I am, of course referring to Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. They represent an enduring hope, a hope that refused to die, a hope that in the fulness of time, is fulfilled in their son, John, who is to prepare the way for the one from Bethlehem.

And it is the fulfilled hope of that old couple which is given to Mary as a sign, ‘Know this too, your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son... for nothing is impossible to God.’

In the meeting of the old Elizabeth and the young Mary, the Old Testament meets the New Testament. The ‘ancient promise’ meets its fulfilment in two mothers. Elizabeth, the mother of the last great prophet, who will go before the Lord, and Mary, the mother of the Lord, himself. It is a time of ‘Good News’ and of great blessing. The old promises are new events. And now is the time of their long-awaited fulfilment. – It is a most truly great time!

It is through Mary that God is seen to keep the promise announced through the prophet Micah so long ago. The promise of God will take flesh in her womb, and be formed in the person of her son, Jesus the Messiah. In today’s Gospel Mary is blessed for believing, “... that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled”.

In Mary we see that God doesn’t just make promises, he keeps them. In Mary we see someone who allows the promises of God to shape her whole life, and not in a passive way, because she says, “Yes” to the promise happening in her.

The promise has a name: Jesus. He will fulfil all that has gone before and give new meaning to all that will happen after him. He stands at the very centre of time, ‘BC’ and ‘AD’. And he is the one who stands at the centre of our lives.

At Christmas we celebrate the great event that Jesus is the kept promise of God, he who comes to us as a gift of the Father, inviting us to have the confidence to make our own promises. As Christians we are people of promises, and God holds fast to the words of promise we have made to him. As Advent draws to a close, we thank God for keeping his word to us, and ask him to help us keep our word to him and to each other.

As W.H. Auden wrote, “Words are for those with promises kept.”

We have God’s own promise.