

Homily of Fourth Sunday of Advent Year A

Today we light the fourth purple candle which is called the candle of love. Christmas is only three days away. The incarnation took place because of God's love for the world. Jesus himself explains this love in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." It is this love of God that we celebrate today. 1John 4:10-11 writes, "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and has sent his Son as expiation of our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we must love one another." Mary was the channel through which Jesus, who is the fullness of God's love, came into the world. In the same way, we are challenged to become channels of God's love to others always, especially as we celebrate Christmas.

Mary said yes to angel Gabriel to become the means through which Jesus came into the world. In the same way, the word of God has been inviting us throughout the Advent journey to become channels of God love in our world. Like Mary, it is by the power of the Holy Spirit and the overshadowing of the Most High that we conceive love and bring forth love. Our participation in sharing God's love with others brings the mystery of the incarnation to its completeness. This is what St Paul means in the second reading where he says, "We have received the grace of apostleship." We are therefore apostles and messengers of God's love.

An apostle or a messenger listens to the voice of his master or her mistress and does the will of his master or her mistress, not his or her own will. In the first reading, Ahaz, the king of Judah, refused to trust God and do what God commanded him to do. At that time, Ahaz was surrounded by his enemies, the king of Damascus and the king of Samaria. Ahaz was panicking. God sent Isaiah to him to encourage him not to panic, and not to seek support from pagan nations. Ahaz refused. Rather, he aligned himself with the king of Assyria, built pagan altars and led the people astray. In times of difficulties, let us not panic or seek solution from wrongful means. Let us trust God and wait for him to act.

In the Gospel, Joseph faced a difficult situation. He was not responsible to Mary's pregnancy. The Gospel tells us that Joseph being a righteous man, was unwilling to expose Mary to shame. He decided to divorce her quietly. However, unlike Ahaz, Joseph listened to the message of the angel of the Lord and did what God directed him to do. He did not divorce Mary. He took her as his wife, and by so doing, he became the foster father of Jesus.

We have a lot to learn from Joseph's response to the news of Mary's pregnancy. In ancient Israel, women were given to marriage at a very young age. Most girls were betrothed before they were fourteen years old. With such culture, premarital sex was very rare. In the Old Testament are punishments for premarital sex (and by extension premarital or extramarital pregnancy). One of the punishments is: If a man marries a girl who was presented to be a virgin, and then he finds out that she is not a virgin, "they shall bring the young woman to the entrance of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a shameful crime in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house" (Deuteronomy 22:19-21). Joseph had concluded not to subject Mary to such shameful cruel punishment even before the angel of the Lord visited him with instructions from God. Joseph, surely, was a devout Jew, but not a slave of the law. How often do we judge and punish others without mercy! Joseph's self-control, understanding, compassion, and obedience to the will of God are a challenge to us.

The Gospel tells us that 'Emmanuel' means "God is with us." Yes, Jesus is God made flesh. He is the reason for the season. He wants to be with us. Jesus says to us, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). Therefore, over and above the commercial and social activities of the season, let us welcome Jesus and celebrate Christmas in Spirit and in Truth.

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