

4th Sunday in Advent C + 22 December 2024

On this 4th Sunday in Advent, we have now come to the end of our Pray and Prepare Advent program. If you recall, we began this journey into deeper prayer by saying that the first act of prayer is recognizing that you have a heavenly Father who loves you, and who is always inviting you into a personal relationship with Him. Jesus has revealed this truth to us, as the very image of the love of God among us. Jesus has also taught us that the way to enter into this relationship is with the trust and faith of a child. And so this week, we are turning over our Pray and Prepare program to our school children: they will teach us how to pray.

One of the ways in which they will teach us how to pray is by listening so as to hear from God, and not just for ourselves, but for others too. Using the way of imaginative prayer that we talked about last week, they ask the Lord for a 'word' meant for someone else. I don't know if you have ever had someone share with you a word from God for you, but it can be incredibly powerful and encouraging. In fact, we can see this power of God's word by looking to our Gospel today. Now put yourself for a moment in Mary's shoes. She has just been visited by an angel, who has come with the most amazing words imaginable: that she is to become the mother of the Son of God! Now we know that Mary believed the angel's words, but that doesn't make them any less incredible, and yes, even frightening!

And then the angel departs from her. We might imagine a thousand thoughts running through her mind and heart: *did that really just happen? Was I dreaming? What is Joseph going to think? What will everyone else think? Who am I to be the mother of the Messiah? Will I know what to do?* and so on. Now if you've ever been in a situation of excitement and fear and confusion, what's the first thing you do? You talk to someone you trust! So Mary sets out *in haste* to her relative Elizabeth—because surely she would understand. After all, the Angel said that she too would have a miraculous conception. But before Mary can hardly even say hello, Elizabeth prophecies; that is, she has a word from the Holy Spirit for Mary:

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb...Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled! I doubt we can fully comprehend how reassuring these words would have been for Mary. No, she was not dreaming. Yes, this is really happening. And even more, Yes, God really is *with her!* And that all of this is to be a *blessing to her!* We say these words over and over every time we pray the Rosary. Perhaps Mary repeated them to herself many years later, as she watched her son be disbelieved and hated and persecuted. Perhaps at the foot of the Cross, she repeated them again as she clung to her faith, that this was not the end: *Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.*

When we pray the Rosary, we are often led to consider how much comfort the Blessed Mother would have given to Elizabeth, and that is true. But Elizabeth was also a blessing to

Mary. She was not too shy to share God's words with Mary. She didn't worry, what if she thinks I'm crazy? Rather, she allowed the joy in her heart to overflow to her young relative, who certainly would have appreciated the encouragement. Elizabeth is a great model of holy boldness to all of us. We should not be afraid to share the Lord's Word with others, nor fear to ask (or even beg) Him for a Word in prayer when we need to hear it ourselves!

Now it's true, we are not (yet) Saints, and we must always be discerning with the words that others may give us. The same rules that we considered for the discernment of spirits apply to the words of prayer that others may have for us. But we certainly shouldn't allow the doubt of our fallen human natures to dismiss them outright either. I could give you many examples from my own life when others have shared a Word with me, sometimes unintentionally, that I knew instantly was coming straight from God. Some of these words gave me a little spiritual boost when I felt tired or doubtful. Some of them lifted me out of spiritual desolation. Some of them even took away, if only for a time, health struggles.

But perhaps you're thinking, how do we know that this isn't just "the power of positive thinking," kind of like tweets from Joel Osteen? Well, as we will hear from the children, there are a number of ways you can discern whether or not this Word is from the Lord. First, do I trust the source? Do I know this word is coming from a person of prayer? Next, is this word in line with Scripture and Tradition? 3rd does it resonate in my heart? If not, I can either set it aside to see if speaks to me at a later time, or just I can just let it go, with no harm done, and simply receive the gift that someone else cares enough to pray for me.

Finally (this one is really helpful), is it somewhat surprising? That is, is this the word that I *wanted* to hear, or that I *needed* to hear? I remember at one difficult time in my life praying for a word; specifically, I wanted to know that God was still with me, and that I was not alone, even though that was how I felt. But what I eventually heard was different: the Lord addressed me in His usual firm but gentle way, saying: *you are always with me*. Do you see the difference there? Yes, I was not alone. But the center is not me, but Him. He is not with me; rather, *I am with Him*. That movement from self to the Lord as the center makes all the difference. I needed that truth as much as I needed a word of encouragement.

And so as we prepare to celebrate Christmas this week, let's try to keep the "ears of our hearts open" to listen for God's word, spoken specifically to us. It may be a kind word spoken or written in a Christmas card. It may be a particular line in a Christmas carol, in verse from one of the readings, thought in a homily, and so on. God does speak, but I think we often miss His words to us. When we fill our lives with constant noise and busyness, it's hard to hear Him speak. When we don't really believe that God is inviting us to be in a personal relationship with Him, we won't be listening for His voice. Mary was listening for God's voice, and when she heard it, she received it in faith, and the Word was made flesh. That same "Christmas invitation" is offered to each of us in a different way. Let us ask the Lord to help us to receive it and believe it, with childlike faith.