

4 Advent C - 20 December 2009  
Micah 5:2-4; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45(46-55)  
Jim Stockton

It takes humility to love and it takes love to be humble. Of the many lessons from the life and example of Mary the mother of Jesus, I suggest that the mystery of the holy symmetry between these two chief virtues may well be the greatest that people can learn from her. All around, people are getting ready to celebrate Christmas. It may be said that people are doing so already. And so I think it is important that people who follow Jesus, that is, people who have a sense that this holiday is a Holy Day, avoid rushing to the celebration, to the stable, if you will, to the great occasion of Jesus' birth, before pausing this one more Advent Sunday to spend some time with Mary; with the witness of her humble love and her loving humility before God.

Women comprise that portion of the world's population that actually gives birth to children. According to the United Nations Statistics Division, the world is populated by approximately 3,443,000,000 men and 3,387,000,000 women. This means that the portion of the population that bears responsibility for carrying the unborn next generation for nine months, and for giving birth to them, remains a minority, even only by the slight margin of 53,000,000 people. I was wondering the other day if perhaps somewhere in the lost memory of unwritten history God might have first created men to be the ones to give birth to the babies in the family; then if God might have quickly discovered that the men of the world had somehow found other things to do rather than availing themselves of 'the joys of childbirth.'

I'm the father of three, and I so I speak from personal experience and from anecdotal evidence gathered from conversations with my fellow husbands and fathers. And I feel confident in saying that if we men suddenly were the ones called by nature or even by God to be giving birth, the future of the human race would be suddenly very brief.

There is, I think, a humility and a love involved in being an expectant mother that an expectant father can only imagine, and never, I believe, fully experience. I suppose this is likely something so central to womanhood

and to motherhood that the woman whose motherhood is by adoption or marriage, rather than by birth, also knows this gift of humble love; and I suppose that, like every mother, she knows it in a way that the man who is father by marriage, adoption, or seed, still knows it to be beyond himself. But here I can only speculate; because I am of that half of the population for whom the humble love of motherhood, and its loving humility, shall remain forever outside our own being.

Not humility per se, but something related to it, is that quality of life and character of existence most familiar to the ancient people of God. The words that we hear this morning from the prophet Micah are spoken in his day to a people broken in spirit, discouraged, and humiliated. In his day, for Micah to propose that this little town would ever be of significance to anyone in any way is completely absurd. 'From you, O Bethlehem,' he calls, 'shall come a ruler for the people of God.' This little town is entirely overshadowed by the Holy City of Jerusalem, a mere five miles away, less than two hours on foot.

Even as the birthplace of the great King David, it enjoys no special reverence or respect. Its name, meaning 'house of bread,' remains a perfect fit. It associates the place with nothing more inspiring than a form of basic daily sustenance. 'From this most humble place,' says the prophet, 'a ruler and guide shall rise for the people.' 'When the time of labor and delivery are over,' says God, 'this one shall come and feed the people, secure them, and bring them peace.' Unthinkable in his own day, Micah's prophecy about Bethlehem is well-regarded today because of Jesus' birth there. It takes the majesty of the Savior sent from God to move the world to begin to appreciate the humble nature of his human origins.

At the time of his prophecy, even Bethlehem itself, the people there, can only wonder who it is to whom they might give birth. 'What will this yet unborn person grow up to become? Will our influence help this person not just to be a ruler, as the prophet has said; but to be the kind of ruler that God is calling for?' They can only wonder of their

metaphorical offspring, 'Will this person one day make us proud? More important, will this person be proud one day to have been born among us?'

We can only speculate what influence his origin in humble Bethlehem may have had on Jesus. We can, I think, give God thanks and praise that Jesus is not born in the superior surroundings of Jerusalem nor to any of the families of privilege and power who live there. I read someone's description of a cartoon that they had seen. A little boy is on the phone. He's saying to someone on the other end, "Yes, Mom is in the hospital. So Billy, Susie, Betty, me, and Dad are all alone at home." By her absence as well her presence, mother's influence is always there.

Mary's influence on Jesus almost certainly begins before he is even born. Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. We here about this in the reading from the Gospel today. The miracle of conception has come to both women. Elizabeth is Mary's senior by many years. She has long been thought far too old to become pregnant; and yet, Mary arrives to find her cousin even further along than she herself. And as it happens, both have heard from the very same angel sent to each by God, to tell first Elizabeth and then Mary that she is about to become a mother.

Elizabeth is carrying the baby who will grow up to become John the baptizer, the audacious and confrontational forerunner of the Messiah. Even before he is born, says Elizabeth, her own baby leaps for joy at the sound of the voice of the mother of Jesus. 'Blessed are you among woman,' she declares to Mary, 'and blessed is the fruit of your woman, Jesus.'

And if Elizabeth is too old, it is quite possible that Mary is thought to be too young. Given the culture of her time, it is likely that Mary is a young teenager becoming engaged to a man more her senior than we might normally approve in our own day. But in her day it is enough that he will provide for her; it is enough that he will be good to her; and in her day and in our own, this may just have to be enough.

But for Mary, there is more. Humiliation changes to humility and Mary experiences the fullness of God's grace. It is, I think, an experience that people can only

imagine. Can you or I possibly imagine how it feels to be the expectant bearer of the promise of God? And in a way, the answer must always be 'No.' As unique is the person of Jesus, so also must the experience of his mother be unique in human history. Who knows how long God searched for the humble love and loving humility that would welcome with joy the burden of responsibility of bearing and caring for the Love of God in person?

Can you or I possibly imagine how it feels to be the expectant bearer of the promise of God? In an important way, the answer needs to be, 'Yes.' For whether metaphorically or literally, anyone who has helped to bring into being, for the sake of someone else, a blessing greater than themselves has loved humbly enough to be a bearer of the Love of God. It may be that those of us who are women generally understand this more readily than do we who are men; and if so, then so be it.

And if so, then you can help the rest of us, please, to learn. Please help us who continue to struggle to be humble enough to accept God's Love; and in so doing you can help us to help others who struggle, too. Please help us and those around us to continue to love above all else that we try to do; so that whatever else we are attempting in life, we are doing it humbly enough that it is shaped by our love and by God's Love moving through us.

Please help us and help us to help others, to learn this most important lesson: that God's Love must be present not in the ways that humanity expects it, but in the way that God knows we need it to be. Help us to learn it with you, to hear it, to see it, and to believe it: that God's Love must be born not only of the divine stuff of heavenly glory, of infinite power, of holy mystery. Help us learn that God's Love in this the world is born of the human stuff of you and me.

And so may Almighty God, in great mercy has come near to us bless us, preserve, and keep us, that in Christ we may abide, and Christ may abide in us; through the hope, the peace, the joy, and the love that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and for ever. Amen.