

4th Sunday of Advent



Today's readings are examples of seeking wisdom and trying to work out the best thing to do.

1. David wants to know if he should build a magnificent piece of architecture as God's dwelling place;
2. Mary wonders how she can be the one who provides the precious dwelling for the unborn Son of God.

Let us reflect on the times this week when we have tried to fathom what we should be doing next. We thank the Lord for being with us as a guide and good counsellor.

2 Samuel 7:1-5. 8-12. 14. 16

David is getting ready for his next big project. Having overcome his enemies, he wonders if he now needs to build a house for the ark of God. God, however, has different ideas of greatness.

Romans 16:25-27

In his letter to the Romans, Paul explains that the mystery which has puzzled generations of seekers of truth has now been resolved. The wisdom of God has been revealed in the person of Jesus.

Luke 1:26-38

We see two sides of Mary's character.

1. A meek and humble servant of the Lord;
2. but also a strong and courageous young woman, able to ask sensible questions, even of an angel, the messenger of God.



"Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son."

Reflection

How does wisdom work? Meister Eckhart, a famous German Dominican philosopher, theologian and mystical writer of the thirteenth century, said:

"Wisdom consists in doing the next thing you've got to do.
doing it with your whole heart,
and finding delight in doing it."

So how do we find out what we've got to do next? This time last year, it would have been all about making elaborate plans and schemes, perhaps to be more successful in our professional lives, or just in shopping for the things that we have worked so hard to be able to acquire.

Now, as this momentous and, in many ways, tragic year draws to its close, we may wonder what is now the next thing we've got to do. How will we do it with our whole hearts and find delight in doing it?



In today's Gospel, we've got the arrival of the angel Gabriel, who invites Mary to rejoice that she has been chosen to be the mother of Jesus. Classical artists always tended to depict Mary as a docile young woman, often kneeling in prayer as she accepts the awesome invitation. Mary, though, is also eminently practical: she asks the angel to explain how this will be possible since she hasn't got a husband. Mary is testing the wisdom of the message she's received. She is being invited to risk her reputation and perhaps even her life. The law of Moses would have classified her as someone deserving death by stoning, since she would have been regarded as an adulteress. She would also have known that her parents would have been disgraced in their community because of their daughter's shame. The angel, in reply, is able to offer compelling evidence that the invitation to Mary is genuine. Against all the odds, Mary's relative Elizabeth, well beyond the age of childbearing, is now expecting a baby herself. It is a sign of God's blessing.

We, of course, know how the story of Jesus unfolded: all sorts of joy and sorrow, contradictions and challenges, leading to his death on a cross as a criminal and, ultimately, his resurrection in glory. But, like the uncertainty which has been the hallmark of this year, let us simply sit with the tensions and the challenges of what Mary was asked to do and be assured that it all worked out well for her, and for us, in the end.

We use all sorts of imagery for holiness and commitment. Our readings today use the imagery of the dwelling places of God. David does not simply go off and begin his great construction enterprise without checking with his wise advisor, the prophet Nathan. As it turns out, David doesn't get to finish the work. It falls to his son, Solomon, to complete the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. God's promise to David was to make David himself the house. His family line would be forever blessed, and this was achieved through the birth of Jesus, after being 'housed' by Mary.



We use the image of the house for many aspects of our lives. Our political institutions are often named "houses". "House of David" meant the entire chosen people of God rather than a building. What type of house can we make for God this Christmas, at the end of a year in which our own homes may have been places of refuge and safety but also places of restriction and confinement, away from family and friends? What did we learn about the things that make our houses good places to be? Were these physical items or ways we use our time? Should we ration our social media activity so that we can actually be present in real time to other people, or do the new technologies offer us more opportunities to connect with people who are isolated and unwell? How can we be more fully the house of God as we go forth to love and serve the Lord this Christmas?

We remember that after his birth, the first house of Jesus was a stable and that he had to rely on the shelter offered by strangers.

Are we able to take this as our model for the Christian life?

G	A	B	R	H	E	S	U	O	H	ANGEL	GABRIEL	JOSEPH
A	J	O	S	T	N	O	S	T	A	MARY	REJOICE	SON
B	A	R	R	E	N	N	E	M	N	LORD	JESUS	CHILD
R	C	E	E	R	D	B	D	A	D	ELIZABETH	BARREN	HANDMAID
I	O	C	J	A	A	I	A	Y	M			
E	B	H	O	Z	S	L	V	R	A			
L	N	I	I	A	E	U	I	A	I			
O	S	L	C	N	G	O	S	M	D			
R	E	D	E	N	A	N	G	E	L			
D	A	V	I	H	P	E	S	O	J			




The Christmas scene projected on the façade of St Francis Basilica, Assisi.

MAY THE LORD,
WHO CAME TO US AS A
HELPLESS CHILD
BORN IN A HUMBLE STABLE,
TEACH US WHAT TRULY
MAKES FOR
HAPPINESS, JOY AND PEACE.