**FEAST OF THE ANNUNCIATION** St Luke 1:24-38 St Mark 8:34 – 9:1

The Feast of the Annunciation always falls in Lent and because we are anticipating it today it overlaps with the Sunday of the Veneration of the Cross. We celebrate the Mother of God receiving the message of her imminent pregnancy with a mixture of confusion and joy and in her typical humility she accepts God’s plan with the response, “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word”. As she develops she will experience a marriage to a much older man who already has a family and as she is about to give birth an enforced journey in order to obey the dictates of the ruler of a powerful military force which is occupying her country. She will endure homelessness on that journey and childbirth in the lowliest of circumstances, a cave shared with animals where she receives visitors both of high and low standing, both local and those from afar who bring the most precious of gifts. And after that birth she will be the cause of a heinous mass slaughter of male children and suffer voluntary exile in a neighbouring country to prevent the death of her son. Finally, she will stand at the foot of a cross on which her only son is being crucified like a common criminal. As we can see from the icon at the foot of the steps the swords which are piercing her heart are exactly what she is in fact enduring. Despite all this her response to the angel who has visited her and to whom she has issued her fiat is unswerving and resolute. Her reward is to be translated into heaven as her son and his followers gather round her deathbed.

Just over a week ago we read in chapter 6 of the prophecies of Isaiah how the prophet finds himself in a vision in the presence of the Lord and his holy angels, the seraphim. He experiences and bewails in a crushing way his sinfulness amidst such holiness. But an angel appears with a burning coal which touches his mouth and with the words which are echoed by the priest in the sanctuary when he drinks from the chalice, “Behold this has touched your lips and taken away your iniquity” the prophet’s sins are removed. Then the Lord asks who is willing to go on this mission to Israel, the people who will “hear but not understand and will see but not perceive” and who will be punished with exile in a foreign land. The prophet asks that he might be the messenger and his wish is granted. It is no surprise that the prophecies of Isaiah are prescribed for our weekday reading in Lent to remind us of how we too have betrayed God and drifted away from Him. Like the response of Mary, we see a tremendous act of service willingly undertaken by the prophet, a desire to serve God which comes from deep within. A hymn to the prophet Isaiah is sung very appropriately at the ordination of a priest and at the marriage service reminding those involved of the hard path which lies ahead namely of green martyrdom and suffering. Burden bearing applies to both conditions.

We are also celebrating today the Veneration of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross and we have read in the appointed passage from St Mark’s gospel the words, “There are some standing here who will not taste of death till they have seen the Kingdom of God come with power”. What do these words mean for us or are they restricted to Christ’s time?

It is interesting that the passage is immediately followed without interruption by an account of the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor; so perhaps we can deduce that like the disciples Peter, James and John who witnessed this event this experience is somehow relevant for us. We, like the prophet, are sent to wherever the Holy Spirit guides us, to serve the Church of Christ and the world with what we have and most importantly to be likewise transfigured as we are meant to be. How do we do this? The preceding verses in the passage from St Mark speak about ‘denying oneself’, ‘taking up our cross’ and ‘losing our life by gaining the whole world’. These words are particularly challenging and require us to reassess ourselves and our lives as we journey through Lent. There is a freedom in Christ which we have lost and need to reclaim as we continue our journey of transfiguration. We need the insight of the Holy Spirit to see what is preventing or holding back this freedom, what is dragging us down, the weight of which we could in fact remove; not those which we cannot and in effect are part of our path to salvation, our calling to life-giving suffering, our Cross, like the Mother of God. Here we need to pray for the wisdom to know the difference.

The path to salvation is carefully laid out by God for each of us in our best interests and by calling on him and the Mother of God who constantly intercedes for us with prayer and fasting we work with him to ‘run the race which he has set before us’. They are ever present to help us as they have both experienced our trials and tribulations in the flesh. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every way has been tested as we are, yet without sin”. An important adjective which is applied to the Cross is “life-giving’. In the case of the Lord it was to rescue mankind from death. Our own crosses have that same capacity to save us and the world.

When St Paul lists the spiritual gifts in his letter to the Galatians he starts with love and in his letter to the Corinthians we find that famous passage which is a kind of eulogy, a hymn to love, ending with the words, “faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love”. The second gift in the Galatians’ passage is joy and that is the gift which is paramount in the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary. The Virgin, like the prophet earlier, is invited to work with God and she accepts without hesitation. The words, “My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath r**ejoiced** in God my saviour”, the Magnificat as it is called, are regularly sung in the Matins service near the end of the canon. This simple joy of being ‘in Christ’ and working with him is something we need to rediscover and pray for its renewal during the Lenten period.

The Virgin Mary who, though apparently weak and humbled in her life, becomes the most powerful advocate in heaven for the Church of her Son on earth. Her simple response of assent to the invitation of the Father changes the world fundamentally. That joy is given to all of us as we search deeply within ourselves for a new vision of God and resolve to offer some new service to Christ, whether great or small.

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