

Homily for 4th Sunday of Advent.

This week, we are in the final stretch of Advent. Our Gospel today is the familiar story of the Annunciation of Our Lord to Mary. This is the moment, where our Lord took on a human nature; this is when God became incarnate for us; this is the moment that the prophets foretold and the Israelites prepared for. And this moment begins with the angel Gabriel being sent by God to the Virgin Mary, with the Good News of the coming of the Messiah; Gabriel says that this child will be great, and will be given the throne of his father King David. Gabriel is explaining that the child will be the long awaited Messiah from David's line; the prophesy that we heard in our first reading is fulfilled in Jesus – Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises that David's kingdom will have a perpetual heir. And, Gabriel goes on to say, that Jesus will reign over the house of Jacob forever. Jesus will be the one to reunite God's people who had been scattered and divided.

I think that, today in our time, we cannot fully appreciate these words..... or maybe we can..? Since the 8th century BC, the northern tribes of Israel were scattered among the Gentiles, and since the 6th century BC, many from the southern tribes had lived in exile. The prophets lamented this tribal dis-integration of God's people, but announced a future reunion of Jacob's descendants under the Messiah who is to come. This is what the Israelites had hoped and prepared for. The good news of the promised Messiah who was to reunite all of God's chosen people would have been something that the prophets and kings of Israel could only hope for.

Isn't this what we see today – again God's people are not together, we are not together because of the pandemic; we are told to stay home to stay safe; regions are going into lockdown, churches are closing again. We lament the fact that for many Catholics, perhaps even ourselves, we will not be able to go to Church this Christmas. The dispersion of God's people today is like the Israelites before Christ, unable to come together and worship. And, unfortunately, for us, this has been going on much longer than the pandemic. As in any crisis or stress, the truth becomes more evident. Most of us know people who don't practice their faith. The pandemic has only made the dis-integration of God's people more apparent to us. But as we look at the Israelites who

were scattered and see *their* need of a Messiah, perhaps we can realize that today we are not much better off – we need the Messiah today as much as the Israelites needed him 2000 years ago; we need to recognize our own need today of the Messiah in our own lives.

So we look around, and see the mess that the world is in, and wonder what's the way forward? To reunite God's people, to bring them hope and comfort in their trials, is only something that God can do - human efforts of redemption, without God, will always fail, but we need to open our hearts to God working in our own lives - I cannot change the world, but I can change myself, and no else one has that responsibility, but me. When Mary said "Let it be done to me according to your word", in the original Greek, the phrase denotes more than just passive acceptance, but that she *wishes* or *desires* to fulfil God's will in her life. This should be our response to God's invitation as well. Do I actively desire to fulfil God's will in my own life, to go out of my comfort zone, to "step out of the boat" at the call of Jesus? Or do I just do God's will "passively" when it's convenient? Do I recognize my own need of Jesus as Saviour and Messiah in *my own life*, even today, even now?

In these last days before Christmas, maybe we can all take a few moments, and make it our prayer each day, to invite the Messiah into our hearts in a new way this year. The Messiah is coming whether we can celebrate in Church or not. Covid cannot stop Christ from coming at Christmas, and it's up to me to make my heart a worthy place to receive him.

"Lord, I want you to come to me. Lord, bring me the peace and love that only you can provide. Lord, help me to open my heart to you; help me to prepare myself to welcome you at Christmas; Lord, come into my heart, my world, my life in a new way this Christmas. Come, Lord Jesus."