

**What Sort of Greeting  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent (B)  
(Lk 1:26-38)**

According to scripture, the second coming of Christ at the end of time will be spectacular in glory, immediately apparent, visible everywhere. Jesus says, “*As the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day*” (Lk 17:24). But the first coming of Christ 2000 years ago was not like that, it was silent and hidden. As we look to the coming of the Lord in our day, we should look more to the first coming than the second. Christ is in our midst, but he comes secretly, hiddenly.

Jesus comes as a baby. A baby is revealed to the world on the day of his birth, but the baby is already present for the world “*in utero*” several months before the nativity. It is this joy and expectation we celebrate in the Church now until the second coming of Christ. We know there will be a final revelation to the world, publicly, on the last day, but Christ is already here, deep within the heart of the Church, silently and hiddenly, in the Eucharist.

When a baby is first conceived, no one knows, except God and the angels who help carry out His will. The first human to know is the mother, and then the father. Gradually, all the family and acquaintances are informed through cards and emails. Finally, on the day of birth the whole world knows. Christ is present within the Church, and his coming is gradually being made known to the whole world, until his second coming. At first, only one person knew he came, and she knew because the angel of the Lord told her. Later St. Joseph, Elizabeth, and other family found out.

God didn't rely on word of mouth to spread news of Christ's coming. By means of angels and heavenly signs, the shepherds knew, and even emissaries from foreign lands, who saw his star. Since his day, apostles have gone to the four corners of the world to announce the Christ. Every year, especially at Christmas, we try to share that news with the world, by cards, emails, or any means.

God thus uses the familiar mystery of a new human life coming into the world to fulfill His plan of the Incarnation. But in God's case it was a uniquely special and miraculous birth. Throughout the Bible, there are accounts of special births – miracle births – to prepare for the greatest nativity of all, the birth of the Son of God as man. Every birth is a miracle of God, Who brings forth a new person and a new human soul in the conception of each child. But certain births were highlighted in the Bible because on the human level they were impossible. For instance, the birth of Isaac, whose parents Abraham and Sarah were very elderly. Or the birth of Samson, whose parents Hannah and Elkanah had also been

infertile. In Jesus' day God gave one final sign in the birth of John the Baptist, whose parents Elizabeth and Zechariah were also elderly and unable to have children. Gabriel told Mary that her kinswoman, who was thought to be barren, was now in her sixth month with child, "for nothing is impossible with God."

All these miracles prepared for the day when the angel Gabriel came to Mary for the most momentous miracle of all: a child conceived entirely by the power of God, bypassing the normal way in which the children of Adam originate. This child will then be a new Adam, the beginning of a new human race, conceived on a different basis, without sin. And so his coming, while completely hidden and secret, is momentous and earth changing, something new.

Mary is troubled by the greeting of the angel, because of the high deference he shows to her, a lowly handmaid. Even the highest angels of God bow down before the mystery of what takes place in the one who is Full-of-grace.

Every family is changed when news of a pregnancy arrives: a re-orientation has to take place. The mother has to endure the hardship and demands of the pregnancy, but everyone has to make preparations, and adjust for the child. With the pregnancy of Mary, however, the world itself is changed, and all men have to adjust their lives in relation to Christ.

Some would rather not. When news of Christ's birth reached Herod, he was perturbed, and sought to kill the child rather than submit to a new dominion. Not only earth, but the order of heaven is changed by the Incarnation of Christ. The angels are in wonder that the Most High God would condescend to be born as a man. Theologians speculate this is behind the reason for Lucifer's upheaval and rebellion. Unlike Gabriel, he will not bow and submit. Revelation depicts him as the dragon standing before the mystery of the Incarnation with hatred and contempt, standing before the "*Woman about to give birth, ready to devour her child when she brought him forth*" (Rv 12:4).

Christmas remains controversial. On the one hand, the "family" of God continues to announce the coming of the Christ Child; on the other hand the powers of the world would rather have nothing to do with Christianity.

As we come to the ending of Advent in 2017, let us join with Mary and Joseph in the joyful expectation of Christ's birth, pondering what the announcement will mean for us.