

TRUE BEAUTY
Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Advent, 2018
Luke 1:39-56

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Gospel read before, Luke 1:39-56: ³⁹ **In those days Mary got ready and hurried to a city of Judah in the hill-country.** ⁴⁰ **She went into Zacharias' home and greeted Elizabeth.** ⁴¹ **When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit,** ⁴² **and exclaimed in a loud voice: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the Child who will come from your womb!"** ⁴³ **Why, then, does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?** ⁴⁴ **For indeed, as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped with delight in my womb.** ⁴⁵ **Moreover, blessed is she who has believed that the Lord will accomplish what He has promised to do for her!"**

⁴⁶ **Mary said,** ⁴⁷ **"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God, my Saviour,** ⁴⁸ **because He has looked kindly on the humble state of His servant. For look! From now on all generations will call me blessed.** ⁴⁹ **For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and His name is holy;** ⁵⁰ **and He is merciful to those who fear Him throughout all generations.** ⁵¹ **He has performed mighty deeds with His arm. He has scattered those who have proud thoughts in their hearts.** ⁵² **He has brought strong rulers down from their thrones but has exalted lowly people.** ⁵³ **He has filled hungry people with good things but has sent rich people away empty.** ⁵⁴ **He has come to help His servant Israel, so that He has remembered to be merciful,** ⁵⁵ **to Abraham and his descendants for ever, as He has promised our fathers."**

⁵⁶ **Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then went back home.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

As we inch ever closer to Christmas, there is appropriately a great air of anticipation as we prepare to celebrate the nativity of our Lord. This sense of excitement is well captured by the story of our Lord's conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

Women in our culture are too often celebrated for what they look like, instead of for who they are. There are numerous ads trying to sell diet pills and plans, cosmetics, collagen and cosmetic surgery, all aimed at showing women what they can truly be *if only they would improve their appearance*. Glossy magazines feature an endless parade of the latest models and celebrity sensations. Hollywood encourages superficiality and celebrates the lives of the young and beautiful. In many cases, these starlets, having no grounding, meet tragic ends. In any case, such superficiality keeps all of us from recognising true beauty.

In today's Gospel we meet two women of true beauty. The first of these women was probably quite young, perhaps a teenager. Her name was Mary. It was customary for girls in that culture to be betrothed while they were still as young as thirteen years of age. As was the custom of the age, she was engaged to a somewhat older man, a righteous man¹ named Joseph, who was a carpenter² by trade. And, as you know, she found herself to be with Child. Not because she had put the cart before the horse - no, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to proclaim to Mary that her Child would be *conceived by the Holy Spirit*.³ Mary, a virgin, had been chosen to be our Lord's mother, and she received this news with beautiful humility, saying, "*Look! I am the Lord's servant. May it happen to me as you have said!*" (Luke 1:38).

The angel also told Mary that her relative Elizabeth would also bear a child.⁴ No doubt young Mary knew that Elizabeth would be a good mentor as she prepared for the difficult task of motherhood. So, bursting with youthful energy, Mary hurried up into the hill country to visit with Elizabeth and to tell her the good news.

¹ Matthew 1:19

² Mark 6:3

³ Luke 1:35

⁴ Luke 1:36

Elizabeth was married to Zacharias, a distinguished priest who served in the temple. Unlike Mary, she was advanced in age, and Luke tells us that she was a righteous woman, blameless in all her ways.⁵ As such, she exhibited a true beauty of character, the kind of beauty that is more precious than jewels.

Now, one can imagine how as soon as Mary entered Elizabeth's house, she excitedly told Elizabeth all that had happened: about the angel, about the conception by the Holy Spirit, and about the Child whom she would call Jesus, which means, "*The Lord saves*." Yes, she had good news in every sense of the word, and at this greeting, how did Elizabeth react? Was she perhaps a little jealous that Mary's news was greater than her own? Was she irked or put out by the fact that this young girl, and not she, would give birth to the Saviour? After all, Elizabeth was married to a respected priest who served in the temple. Mary, on the other hand, was only a simple girl, set to marry a simple carpenter. No! There was no jealousy in this beautiful woman. In fact, she was honoured, saying, "⁴³ **Why, then, does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?**" At Mary's good news, Elizabeth's heart was gladdened, and she exclaimed, "**Blessed are you among women and blessed is the Child who will come from your womb!**"

Then, wonder of wonders, Elizabeth's child got into the act. As Elizabeth added, "⁴⁴ **For indeed, as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped with delight in my womb.**"

The presence of the Lord causes a physical response by the child John in Elizabeth's womb. Twice Luke mentions John's leaping in his mother's womb, (41, 44). From Genesis 25:22, we read of Jacob and Esau leaping in Rebecca's womb, foreshadowing the relationship they will have with one another, i.e., the firstborn will serve the second born, so also with John and Jesus. Here John, the forerunner, responds to the presence of Jesus, the Messiah, foreshadowing his own role as precursor. The fleshly presence of the Messiah, the agent of creation, causes great things to take place within God's creation. Already now the new creation is beginning, and a baby still in the womb hails the new creation's inception. In John's leap are foreshadowed the miracles of Jesus, who will cause all creation to leap at His presence. Later, when John would send two of his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the One to come, or should they expect someone else, Jesus replied: "*Blind people see, lame people are walking, lepers are made clean, deaf people hear, the dead are raised, and poor people are having the good news told them,*" (Luke 7:22). In other words, there was much leaping for joy!

While still in his mother's womb, in holy mirth, John the Baptist was already pointing to the Lamb of God, who would take away the sin of the world.⁶ Yes, here is a picture of infant faith and a vivid reminder of why we baptise infants. The child of Elizabeth was already looking forward to what the Child of Mary would accomplish. The infant John was rejoicing that our Lord had become a little babe, just like him.

In today's Gospel we see that human life *in all of its stages* has been sanctified and touched by the beauty of our beautiful Saviour. There is beauty in the unborn child. There is beauty in the godly young mother, and there is beauty in the one who grows older in the wisdom of the Lord. ***All human life, right from conception to death, is made beautiful by the Lord through Whom the world was created, by Whose death the world is redeemed, and by Whose incarnation the world is sanctified.***

Compare this beautiful biblical scene with the ugliness of sin. The ugliness of sin is constantly looking admiringly in the mirror, without a thought for others. The world says, "A woman should not have to carry a child that she doesn't want." In the ugliness of sin, life is all about "me, myself, and I." People regularly judge others by how useful they are to us, and woe to anyone who gets in our way - whether that be an inconvenient child, a person suffering with a handicap, or an elderly person who requires "too much" of our care, attention, and love. So goes the ugliness of sin and vanity.

How much better is it for us to ponder Luke's beautiful scene. Here we see a wonderful *affirmation of life*. Here we see beautiful faith as it is given by God. Consider Mary. At hearing that she would be the mother of our Lord, Mary did not succumb to vanity or engage in empty boasting. She has no ideas of self-promotion or self-fulfilment. Instead, she finds herself raised and graced by what the Lord has done. She finds her fulfillment in what the Lord has promised. Yes, Mary's beauty is in her humility and trust. In response to the angel's word, she simply says, "*Look! I am the Lord's servant. May it happen to me as you have said!*" (Luke 1:38). Describing herself as a female servant,

⁵ Luke 1:6

⁶ John 1:29

this is the same expression Hannah used many centuries before when praying for a child.⁷ By her declaration, Mary shows her faith in and faithfulness to the Word of God through the angel and the promise that is now present in her womb. It was not blind obedience or passive ignorance. No, Mary trusted in the Lord because she knew that He is, in fact, trustworthy. Throughout the ages, our Lord had kept all His promises. He has a long history of raising the lowly and showing kindness to the poor. Mary knew that through her Child, God would do great things.

And so in great joy, Mary began to sing her wonderful song: “⁴⁷ **My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God, my Saviour,** ⁴⁸ **because He has looked kindly on the humble state of His servant. For look! From now on all generations will call me blessed.**” In her Son, she would see the proud scattered and the mighty knocked off their thrones. In her Son, she could see the humble exalted and the hungry filled with good things. In her Son, she could see the salvation of Israel and her own exaltation as well.

Maybe that’s the point of all of this. Mary had the right point of view. Society teaches young women to look in the mirror and judge themselves by appearance. But what’s the result? Either vanity or despair. Because, finally, there’s nothing there. Mary and Elizabeth, on the other hand, were women of substance. One was well advanced in age while the other was youthful and young. Yet they did not vainly look in the mirror but were happy for each other, and more important, they put their focus on Christ. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, the one who had been barren all her life, but now pregnant with John, was most excited by the fact that Mary would give birth to the Saviour, and because of that, Elizabeth could rejoice with Mary. Nor was Mary vain. Rather than look at the mirror of her own youthfulness and loveliness, she looked at what God had done for her and saw the One who would come forth and save her. Yes, the attention of both Elizabeth and Mary was on our Lord. Because they were focusing on Christ, they looked into the face of the Lord and *reflected His beauty.*

So, what does this all mean for us in our world of superficiality and vanity? In this season of Advent, we do well to take some time out of our busy schedules and reflect once more on what it’s all about. We all do well to look beyond the tinsel and Christmas lights, fixing our eyes on the Christ Child, finding our glory in the cross that He would take up on our behalf.

This means teaching our children the countercultural values that Mary sang about in her Magnificat. “**My soul magnifies the Lord,**” she said. There is no doubt that earthly beauty is a gift from God, and trying to look our best is fine. But earthly beauty fades. While the world’s focus is on oneself, we need to move away from the vanity of the mirror and the ugliness of pride. We do better to adorn ourselves with Christ and to put on His Spirit of holiness. We do better to place Christ before our eyes and before the eyes of our daughters and sons.

Our Lord could have chosen to be born in beautiful Jerusalem, or, for that matter, in glorious Rome. Instead, He chose to be born in lowly Bethlehem, least among the cities of Judah. He could have chosen to enter into the family of the high priest or be born into the imperial family of Emperor Augustus, but instead He chose to be born into the family of a carpenter, with a poor young maiden as His mother. This beautiful child would become a beautiful Saviour, who would willingly bear the scars and nail marks. As Isaiah would say of Him: “*He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him,*” (Is. 53:2). But that’s true beauty! As He endures the ugliness of the cross, we see His truly beautiful heart!

No, our Lord did not choose to enter into some perfect and ideal world. He chose, instead, to enter our world, with all of its flaws and blemishes. Why? Because He loves us, with all of our flaws and blemishes. Indeed, He comes to wash away the blemish of our sins. He presents us, His Church, as His Bride, clothed in baptismal splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that we might be holy, without blemish.⁸ That is true beauty – the beauty of the incarnation, the beauty of Christmas. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

⁷ 1 Samuel 1:11

⁸ Ephesians 5:26-27

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Heavenly Father, all things in heaven and on earth reveal Your glory and show clearly what You have done. But we now thank You in particular for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and for the salvation You have provided for all people through His sacrificial obedience. We confidently bring our prayers before You in His loving name.

We stand before You with repentant hearts. We acknowledge our many sins. Forgive us for Jesus' sake. Make us more alert to both right and wrong before You. Deliver us from our pet sins, and from those that continually cause us to fall. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, purify the words we speak, and guide everything we do in obedience to Jesus. Heal and renew us. Assure us of Your forgiveness through Jesus' holy, priestly work, that we may possess Your peace, which is beyond all human understanding.

We pray for all people everywhere. Let Your Holy Spirit rule in every home and school, in every shop and office, and in every area of labour and industry. Open the eyes of the nations that people everywhere may see Your glory. Overthrow those who oppose the Gospel of Your Son. Support all who are persecuted for His sake, and prosper all who love Your truth. Be with the fatherless, the homeless, and the comfortless, and lead them to trust You in all their troubles. Send them help that will draw them to You, and will lead them to confess the name of Jesus.

Make Your face to shine on the wounded in spirit, the sick in mind, and the distressed in heart. Protect and bless with Your presence all travellers, and all who are away from home in any service or calling. We pray for captives and prisoners, for the depressed and the lonely, and for all in danger of body and soul. Comfort them with Your presence and help. Be gracious to those among us who are sick and aged, to those who are suffering, to those who are bereaved and those who are dying. Give them all the perfect peace that Jesus has won for them.

Make our hearts a fit dwelling-place for Your Son, that we may know the joy of His presence, and the blessing of following in His steps. And finally give us the glorious crown You have promised to those who cling to Him in firm and patient faith, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Micah 5:2-5a

² However, although you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, are too small to be among the clans of Judah, yet out of you One who will be the Ruler over Israel will come forth for Me. His origins are from of old, from the days of eternity. ³ Therefore, He will give them up until the time when a woman in labour has a Child. Then the rest of His brothers will return to the people of Israel. ⁴ He will stand and shepherd His flock with the strength of the LORD, with the majesty of the name of the LORD, His God. They will live securely, for then His greatness will reach as far as the ends of the earth. ⁵ He will be a man of peace.

Hebrews 10:5-10

⁵ Therefore, when Christ came into the world, He said: "You have not wanted sacrifice and offering but have prepared a body for Me. ⁶ You have had no pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin. ⁷ Then I said: 'Look! I have come (It has been written about Me in the scroll of the book). I have come to do Your will, O God.'" ⁸ First Christ says: "You have not wanted sacrifices, offerings, burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin," which are offered according to the Law, and "You have had no pleasure in them." ⁹ Then He has said, "Look! I have come to do Your will." He does away with the first, to establish the second. ¹⁰ By this will we have been made holy, through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.

Luke 1:39-56

³⁹ In those days Mary got ready and hurried to a city of Judah in the hill-country. ⁴⁰ She went in-to Zacharias' home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's

greeting, the baby leaped in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and exclaimed in a loud voice: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the Child who will come from your womb! ⁴³ Why, then, does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For indeed, as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped with delight in my womb. ⁴⁵ Moreover, blessed is she who has believed that the Lord will accomplish what He has promised to do for her!"

⁴⁶ Mary said, ⁴⁷ "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God, my Saviour, ⁴⁸ because He has looked kindly on the humble state of His servant. For look! From now on all generations will call me blessed. ⁴⁹ For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and His name is holy; ⁵⁰ and He is merciful to those who fear Him throughout all generations. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with His arm. He has scattered those who have proud thoughts in their hearts. ⁵² He has brought strong rulers down from their thrones but has exalted lowly people. ⁵³ He has filled hungry people with good things but has sent rich people away empty. ⁵⁴ He has come to help His servant Israel, so that He has remembered to be merciful, ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants for ever, as He has promised our fathers."

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then went back home.