

Fourth 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 for this Sunday is written in the book of Luke 1:39-56, which was in our Gospel reading before.

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,
Peace be with you.

Christians down through the centuries have always debated the level of honour we should give to Mary, the Mother of our Lord. At one end of the spectrum, we have those who insist that Mary participated in Jesus' suffering in that she was there at the cross, and her suffering as a mother watching her son die contributes to our salvation, and at the other end of the spectrum, we have those recognize that we need Mary to give birth to Jesus, but that's about it.

The church of Rome encourages people to actually pray to Mary with these words: "Hail Mary full of Grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." This is the prayer that people are talking about when you hear someone in a Roman Catholic religious context speak of the "Hail Mary." The first part of this prayer is a paraphrase of Gabriel's greeting to Mary when he announced that she would indeed be the Mother of our Lord. The second part of this prayer is taken from the Gospel that we just heard where Elizabeth by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit referred to Mary as the "**...Mother of my Lord..**" The last part of this prayer was framed by the Church of Rome itself, and it is this last part that causes all kinds of confusion.

So, do we toss the entire prayer out because Rome uses it? Do we keep parts? More importantly, where DOES Mary fit into the life of the church? Well today's Gospel has something to tell us about that.

Perhaps, one of the most confusing phrases in this prayer is the title given to Mary ... Mother of God. Perhaps it is our sinful nature at work thinking that if we call Mary the Mother of God, that we are saying she "earned" the right to be Jesus' mother. Perhaps some think it means that Mary herself must be a "little divine" if she is to be the Mother of God. Many people think that calling Mary the Mother of God is giving her too much credit. If Mary is the Mother of God, then there must be something supernatural or divine about her. It makes Mary more important than she really is.

While it's very natural to jump to this conclusion, it's still jumping to a conclusion. We wouldn't make that leap with the mother of any other famous person. For example, if I searched the Internet for the mother of a famous person, I might find a mother by the name of Debbie Thurston. Now I know that she has never played on an NRL team. It's possible that she has never played a game of football in her life. Yet, no one in their right mind would deny her the title of the Mother of J.T. We don't expect the mother of an NRL halfback to be any kind of a football player at all. We don't even expect her to be an athlete of any kind. In the same way, just because Mary is the Mother of God, that does not mean that she herself has any godlike abilities or characteristics.

The second, and more reliable case for giving Mary the title, "Mother of God", is the response that Elizabeth had under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, **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?** Elizabeth, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, called Mary the mother of my Lord. So it is that we too can call Mary the mother of my Lord.

In fact, when we call Mary the Mother of God, we are not so much saying something unusual about Mary herself. Instead, we are actually saying something miraculous and astonishing about her son, Jesus. If we admit that Mary is the Mother of God, then the contents of her womb is God. The child that Mary carried when Elizabeth greeted her is in fact the Lord in human flesh.

When we say that Mary is the Mother of God, we are simply saying that Mary is the woman God chose to carry His Son during gestation and to care for His Son as a human being until He grew to the point where He could care for Himself. In other words, Mary would do for God the Son exactly what any good mother would do for any of her children.

So, the problem with the last sentence of the "Hail Mary" is not that it refers to Mary as the Mother of God for that's what she is. The problem is that the last sentence makes petition to Mary as though she were alive on this earth.

The Law of God is fairly clear. When the Children of Israel were ready to enter the Land of Canaan and conquer it, Moses said to them, **"When you enter the land that the LORD, your God, is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable practices of those nations! 10 No one shall be found among you who sacrifices his son or his daughter in the fire, anyone who makes predictions by casting lots, who conjures up spirits, who observes omens, who practices sorcery, 11 who casts spells, who is a medium, who possesses a familiar spirit, or who consults the dead! 12 For the LORD detests all who do these things, and the LORD, your God, is driving those nations out before you because of these detestable practices."** (Deuteronomy 18:9–12, ESV) With these words we learn that one of the reasons God allowed the Children of Israel to wipe out the inhabitants of Canaan is that the inhabitants of the land were talking to the dead. According to Moses, inquiring of the dead is an abomination to the Lord.

Since Mary has been dead for almost two thousand years, talking to her is an abomination to the Lord. So, when someone asks, Mary to "pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death," they are in fact, inquiring of the dead and dabbling in the occult.

Please understand that this is not to say that Roman Catholics are not Christian. What it does say is that the Church of Rome teaches false doctrine when it teaches people to pray the "Hail Mary." This is doubly true when the church assigns the "Hail Mary" as penance, for then they are not only teaching this prayer to their members, but they are also teaching their members that saying this prayer is a way of working off the penalty of sin.

So, we see that we should honour Mary. We should give thanks to God for the work that He did through Mary in bringing our only Saviour into this world. Today's text even teaches us that it is proper to refer to Mary as the Mother of God. But we cross the line when we talk to Mary and ask her to do things for us.

There is much more that we could learn from today's Gospel, but the important thing is not so much that Mary is the Mother of God, but that God is the Son of Mary. When God the Son took up human flesh, He didn't merely put on humanity as you or I would put on a change of clothing. God the Son went all the way. This includes taking up the nine months of pregnancy that all of us experienced at the beginning of our lives. In a miracle that we cannot hope to understand, the Holy Spirit quickened one of Mary's eggs into a single living cell ... a single cell that was God the Son ... the Christ. From that moment on, the Christ was, IS, and always will be both one hundred per cent God and one hundred per cent human.

Mary responded to Elizabeth with a poem that is so elegant that the church has given this poem a name ... the Magnificat. Recall that the poem begins this way: "**And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God, my Saviour;**" (Luke 1:46-47, ESV) With these words, Mary recognizes God in her Son is her Saviour ... her Saviour from sin. God took on the flesh of Mary so that He could save Mary. He took on the flesh of humanity so that He could save humanity. He became a human being like you and I so that He could save us.

The single cell God-man in Mary's womb did what all human beings do. He multiplied and grew. Mary will give birth to her first born son. He will grow and become a man ... a man who had an appointment with a cross.

As God stepped down from heaven into the womb of the Virgin, He took His first step to the cross. The cross is the reason He took up human flesh in the first place. He came to be Mary's Saviour, and not only her Saviour, but also the Saviour of all mankind. For as He took up human flesh He also humbled Himself under the Law in order to fulfill the law in our place. Then as He suffered on the cross, He took up the wrath of God that we all earned with our sin. This is the way in which He is Mary's Saviour and the Saviour of us all.

Jesus came forth from the womb of the Virgin, and He also came forth from the depths of the tomb. Death could not hold one whose sacrifice was so pure and holy. Instead, Jesus rose and gives us the guarantee that we shall follow Him in His resurrection as our own bodies rise from the dead to live forever in immortality ... bodies that will live forever because of the work of God the Son who took up our humanity when Mary became His mother. **Amen**

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

Prayer for the 4th Sunday in Advent

P O Lord God Almighty, who came among us in Jesus Christ to forgive and to save, extend Your everlasting kingdom of grace and mercy to all people on earth. Continue to strengthen those whom You have brought into Your kingdom by grace through faith in Christ. Bring to faith those not yet within Your Church so that they may receive the redemption from sins which Your Son purchased for us upon the cross. **Lord, in Your mercy,**

C **Hear our prayer.**

P Eternal Lord, as we feebly struggle with the effects of sin here on earth, keep us firm in the faith, confident of Your promises of everlasting life in Christ. Govern our hearts by Your Holy Spirit that in our daily need, and especially in all time of temptation, we may seek and receive Your help and, by a true and lively faith in Your Word, obtain all that You have promised. **Lord, in Your mercy,**

C **Hear our prayer.**

P God of our salvation, remember our pastors, teachers, and servants of our Church. Strengthen each one to hold forth faithfully the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. We pray for labourers for the harvest. Instill in the men of our congregations a love and a receptive heart for Your name, so that from their number You might raise up some to serve as Pastors to Your flock. Grant all our congregations to increase and abound in love for one another and for all, so that the schemes of the evil one may come to nothing. **Lord, in Your mercy,**

C **hear our prayer.**

P Almighty God, You care for our earthly lives by many gifts, skills, and vocations. We thank You for blessing us with loving people who dedicate their lives in service to You as they protect and care for us. We especially thank You for all public servants, military personnel, police officers, firefighters, doctors, nurses, and all those who support them in their various callings. Help us see You at work through the service of those You place on earth to defend and care for us. **Lord, in Your mercy,**

C Hear our prayer..

P Heavenly Father, ruler of all things, Your Son, our Saviour, healed all manner of infirmities and cured all manner of diseases. Mercifully come to the aide of Your servants during their times of affliction, strengthen those that are in nursing homes and care facilities that You would give them with unity of heart, mind, and witness, that nothing may hinder the work You have called us to do. (especially
). Deliver them from the temptations of the evil one, and give them patience and comfort as they rest in Your Son's promise never to leave them or forsake them. **Lord, in Your mercy,**

C Hear our prayer.

P Lord God, as we prepare to receive the Sacrament of the Altar this day, we thank You that You can do all things and that nothing is impossible for You. For as You dwelt among us in the mystery of the Word made flesh long ago, so also You dwell among us today with Your holy Body and most precious Blood in, with, and under simple bread and wine, giving to us poor sinners forgiveness, life, and salvation. Grant us repentant hearts as we approach Your altar this day. By this Sacrament, keep us in the true faith. **Lord, in Your mercy,**

C Hear our prayer.

P O Lord God, You have revealed and made known Your boundless love for us in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Grant that His Incarnation continue to enlighten Your Church on earth as we wait for the day when He will come from heaven one last time to bring to completion that work that was begun in us at baptism. **Lord, in Your mercy,**

C Hear our prayer.

P Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy; through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

C Amen.