

4th Sunday of Advent (B)
(2 Samuel 7:1-5.8-12.14.16 / Luke 1:26-38)
21.12.2014
Holy Spirit

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow.”

These words announce the miraculous birth of the Son of God... and yet I would dare to say that they announce more than that!

In the humble meeting between the angel Gabriel and Mary, God surpasses the wonder of his first Creation by initiating a new world, a renewed Creation. In the beginning “God’s spirit hovered over the water” (Gn 1:2) as a prelude to the seven days of God’s work of creation; now in Nazareth, the Spirit comes upon Mary so that God may begin his work of recreation in Jesus Christ.

This explains why for three weeks we have been asked to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord. This preparation is not just about being ready for the birth of a child, even if that child is the Son of God. The birth we are going to commemorate is the beginning of a new world, an utterly new and unheard-of situation for us and for all.

While the Annunciation is a one-off event in history, it still has an impact on our lives. By the Holy Spirit, the new creation initiated at the Annunciation finds a way into our lives today. Through our baptism, which is “the gateway to life in the Spirit” (CCC 1213), we have been recreated in the image and likeness of God. In the early Church, many Christian writers used to compare the Holy Spirit to a painter whose mission is to “reproduce in us the outline of the heavenly image” (St Ambrose).

Like Mary we can be “deeply disturbed” and puzzled by the prospect of an outpouring of the Spirit in our lives, and yet, like Mary, our consent is needed for the Spirit to accomplish its work in and through us.

Through the Spirit, Mary carries and bears a child who is life itself; through the same Spirit we become bearers of new life. And this is not without frightening us because life, new life in Christ, is challenging.

Questions arise which must be faced: what do we do with the life we carry within us? Do we allow it to transform us and to flow out from us?

Sometimes at a personal and at a community level, we may give the impression that we are afraid of being alive, or can look as if we spend most of our energy trying to smother the fire within us. It is as if the Gospel and all the rules and regulations of the Church were given to us as shackles, as straitjackets to keep life enclosed, locked up within us. Have we forgotten that Jesus Christ came to proclaim the Good News “that we may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10)?

We are dealing here with a life and death situation: a pregnant woman who would not allow the child to come to birth would threaten the life of the child and her own. The life of the Spirit within us is meant to be shared otherwise it dies and we die with it.

This is why St Paul exhorts us: “Never try to suppress the Spirit” (1Th 5:19), “fan into a flame the gift” of the Spirit (2Tim 1:6).

Unfortunately, for all of us, there are times when we quench the Spirit, it is as if we stop breathing spiritually. For sure we may continue to busy ourselves with many things, we

can throw ourselves into a whirlwind of activities that we consider important, and some of them may really be so. This can go on for a time, but just for a time, because we are made for life and not mere survival, we are made for launching out into the deep (cf. Lk 5:4) in life and not for skimming over its surface.

Allow me to quote here a sentence from St Irenaeus which has been quoted many times from this pulpit: "The glory of God is the human being fully alive" (*Adv.* IV, 20, 7). Mary was fully alive because she said yes to the work of the Spirit within her.

The same Spirit is now longing to accomplish his work within us so that we may be fully alive.

In the days to come, we are going to exchange gifts, at least we are hoping to receive gifts! God is going to give us the greatest of all gifts: the seed of imperishable life in Jesus Christ. For this seed to be planted in our hearts and to bear fruit, Christ who is true life must be born in us through the Holy Spirit. We should not be afraid, we are made for life, so let us welcome life as a gift, let us share it generously with others and let us make room for the life of others.

The coming of the Spirit in Mary, the humble servant of the Lord, is a sign and a reminder that in our poverty, we too can become channels of God's life for the world.

May the Holy Spirit come upon us and may the power of the Most High cover us with its shadow, so that "we might no longer live for ourselves but for" God (cf. 4th Eucharistic Prayer), and, in God, live for all our brothers and sisters.