

HOMILY FOR MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

I don't usually begin my homilies with quotes from biblical commentaries but I found what a couple scholars said about today's gospel to be particularly fruitful for reflection. Of the shepherd's visit to the place of Jesus' birth, Fred Craddock says, "Mary and Joseph, busy with the chores of childbirth under the most difficult of conditions, do not themselves experience heaven's visit, but hear of it from the shepherds. How unusual! But theirs is the baby and that is enough." I think Craddock's words give us both an important insight into this text and into the Christian life.

My experience tells me that heavenly visitors are seldom sent to those one would expect. On this feast of Mary, Mother of God we may think of the various visits from the blessed Mother. Whether it be Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugore, or Guadalupe we find that the visits came unexpectedly to children, teenagers, or in the case of the Native American Juan Diego, a member of an oppressed people. In each case, those who received these visits from the Blessed Mother along with her message of God's concern for his people, were considered to be of little importance by most. Often the most pious wouldn't believe them because it was hard to imagine why God would favor these no account people with heavenly visitations when they had been diligently seeking such favors from God for many years, to no avail.

And I can certainly understand their sentiments. Seldom does a day go by when I don't find myself praying, "God, could you give me something here – a word, a sign, a touch, a glimpse – something that would let me know that you are with me – something that would help me know what you want me to do." And just about as often the day goes by without that prayer being answered in any discernable way. There is no visit from an angel, saint or the Blessed Mother. There is no word, no vision, no clear sign that grabs hold of me. There is no touch that I immediately recognize as the hand of God. And the truth of the matter is that this is the way it is most often among the people of God, even the most pious ones.

Now if this is the way it most often is, and if God is in charge, then we have to assume that this is the way it should be. It seems that God wants us to know that life itself is such a gift, that life itself is so chock full of signs of his presence and love, that life itself is such a pregnant context for touching the divine that he doesn't mess with it that often. And when he does, his heavenly visitations come as a surprise so we won't get the idea that we can control or expect them. In this way our God reflects his great wisdom. For the truth is that it is much better to engage fully in the living of life as it is, trusting that God is with us there, than it is to be sitting around waiting for him to put in a special appearance.

So, as Craddock says, Mary and Joseph are busy about the difficult and all consuming business of childbirth without the benefit of the heavenly chorus. And it's probably a good thing that the heavenly chorus didn't show up there. At least my own experience in the delivery room has led me to believe that the last thing Mary needed while in the final pains of labor and delivery was to be visited by a choir of any kind. She knew quite well that she was having a baby, and that it was a most wonderful baby at that. And the best thing that the heavenly chorus could do right then was to sing for someone who would appreciate it, and whose beautiful music wouldn't be broken into by the grunts, groans, and occasional earthy expletives that birthing mothers are inclined to utter at times.

So the shepherds were a better choice after all. And the report of the heavenly visitation they gave to Mary and Joseph was no doubt wonderful. But it only served to confirm what the experience of birthing had already taught them. This child was a miracle that burst forth in the midst of their holding each other and encouraging each other through the most difficult experience of their life. That baby they had wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger was all the confirmation they needed that God was with them. And the shepherd's testimony only increased their sense of joy and wonder.

Another comment made by a scholar on this text helps take our reflection a bit further. Referring to the heavenly visitation of the shepherds out on the land and their subsequent visit to Mary and Joseph in the place where animals were kept, Joel Green says, "God's glory, normally associated with the temple is now manifest on a farm." And so it was. Actually, this was always God's intention. God never wanted his people to think that his involvement in their lives was limited to their visits to the temple.

That's why in the early days of Israel, the dwelling place associated with God's presence was a tent rather than a permanent building in a particular place. That tent went wherever the people went.

And God had given the people something even more compelling that let them know that he was right with them wherever they were. He had given them his name. That was the point of the reading we heard from Numbers today, though we now translate the text in a way that robs it of its full meaning. When God gave his instructions for how the priests were to bless his people – this was the blessing he gave, “May *Yahweh* bless you and keep you! May *Yahweh* let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you! May *Yahweh* look kindly upon you and give you peace.” God's instructions were that his priests invoke his *name* upon the people. In other words, God's blessing was associated with the giving of his name. This is how close God intended to be to his people – that they could call him by name. But as they did with the building, so they did with the name. They created distance between themselves and God by saying that his name was sacred to pronounce and so substituted the title Lord instead. This has always been the inclination of God's people – to push him to the periphery of life and then complain that God seems so far away. But God keeps pushing in.

And that's what we are celebrating today. The God whose name is Yahweh pushed himself into the midst of human life through the womb of Blessed Mary. Now people had to refer to him by name. In fact, in past days this feast was called the feast of the Holy Name. Born into the world as one of us, his is called by name as all people are. God is now called Jesus. And if it isn't enough for God to have a human name, he also has a human mother.

To celebrate that Mary is the Mother of God is to celebrate God's closeness to us. He has embraced our human life completely in the person of Jesus. And so all of human experience becomes a place for meeting him. We don't have to wait for heavenly visitations to see, hear, and touch our God. We only have to live the life he lived. And in its complexities, difficulties, accomplishments and joys we will find him. He is as close to us as the speaking of his name.

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