



21st December Reflection No. 248

Today's readings have been more challenging than normal. I tend to find easily the message of care for others, acceptance, service, solidarity, and like missives from Jesus in the readings upon which I reflect. But today is back to the core reality of the birth of Jesus and the intersection of the divine and human in our history. It also provides a lesson in faith.

The first part of Luke 1 is the story of the announcement to Zechariah that his "elderly" wife Elizabeth will become pregnant at an advanced age. Much like the story of Abraham and Sarai, this was announcement was met with skepticism. How could this be? The woman involved was beyond childbearing years. Setting aside the biological questions (were they pre- or post-menopausal? Had they clearly been "diagnosed" as infertile? Etc.), based on human knowledge at that time neither Sarai nor

Elizabeth were expected to bear children. And yet they became pregnant and delivered healthy baby boys.

Zechariah loses his ability to speak because he did not believe what Gabriel told him. I suspect we all have, at some time or another, experienced a loss (or at least a diminishment) of faith in some form. Imagine losing (even temporarily) a sense or faculty as a consequence of that disbelief. I wonder what the reaction would be – would that make the person more likely to believe, or would the person become embittered and be less likely to be believing?

Zechariah reacted with fear and disbelief to Gabriel's message from God and as a result lost his speech. A very human reaction to having some aspect of our life removed would likely be some frustration, anger, resentment, or an even greater loss of faith. For most (all?) of us, however, our diminishment or loss of faith is not "punished" by removal of some faculty. Instead we continue on with our lives, perhaps unaware of the depth of our loss of faith, perhaps aware that we are losing faith but not sure what we can or should do, perhaps rationalizing that we aren't really losing faith but are instead becoming more aware of deeper realities.

Mary's situation is different from Sarai and Elizabeth. Mary wasn't trying to become (or giving up on becoming) pregnant. Mary was shocked by the visit from Gabriel and his announcement that Elizabeth was pregnant and that she too would become pregnant. Mary's reaction, though, is different from that of Zechariah. Mary asks how this could be happening, and she is reassured that it is part of God's plan. Instead of pushing back, becoming afraid, she accepts the message and trusts that (has faith that) she will receive the strength she needs to fulfill this calling. When Mary arrives at Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth somehow recognizes (is given the insight by the Spirit to celebrate) the depth of Mary's faith and the rewards that it is bringing forth to the world.

Much like Thomas the Apostle after the resurrection, Zechariah's faith was tested because he initially could not accept an event so beyond his human understanding. His faith, like Thomas', was not restored until he observed the physical reality of the birth of his son (and the presence of

the risen Jesus). Mary did not need to see with her own eyes – she believed in the message of Gabriel and the power of the Lord to do what was foretold.

I suspect for most of us our faith is more like that of Zechariah and Thomas, and not like that of Mary. We tend to believe more in what we can see, what is tangible, and less in things that we cannot reduce to our normal human experience. That is why, to me, this is such a wonderful lesson – Mary. Just. Said. Yes! She didn't hem and haw, or equivocate, or rationalize, or any of those normal human reactions. She humbly just said yes.

And so, my prayer today is for the gift to just say yes.

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