

## **Pro Cathedral of Holy Trinity Brussels**

### **4th Sunday of Advent (The Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary)**

#### **Sermon delivered at the 10.30 and 14.00 Services**

##### Gospel Text: Luke 1: 26-38

When I was growing up in a typical village in eastern Nigeria, we learnt table manners. We were taught that you do not talk while eating so that the food does not find its way in the wrong direction. Maybe, it was also because we used to eat very spicy food. But in the European tradition, whether at dinner or lunch or even sometimes at breakfast, it is great opportunity to talk!

Few weeks ago, I was in a training program in the UK, and at lunch time, in the typical European tradition, I and the person sitting next me (a priest from the Netherlands who also had been to Uganda on mission like I did in September 2011) were engaged in a discussion about life and mission in Uganda. We were almost lost in the discussion that we did not pay attention that someone around the same table was interested in the story. She got very sad and complained bitterly. ‘Two of you have disregarded me and have left me out completely in your discussion.’ For couple of seconds, we were all quiet! We all apologised very sincerely to her. She became happy again, and began to tell her own story.

The feeling of being neglected or left out can be very annoying and depressive; but the feeling of being regarded or favoured can be a pleasant one. It can be more pleasant and overwhelming when you know that in fact you should not be regarded or that you do not qualify. Perhaps, each of us might be able to create a sense of what it feels like to be noticed, to be regarded or favoured; or on the contrary, to be disregarded by someone, maybe at a place, in an office, or somewhere. These two words ‘regard’ and favour’ are very important in the text of our gospel reading, on the annunciation of the BVM. The Angel Gabriel uses the word ‘favour’ in verse 28 and 30: “Greetings, you who are highly favour(ed)! The Lord is with you” and “Do not be afraid Mary, you have found favour with God.”

Just one verse before our gospel text, the word favour appears again. Elizabeth makes this remarkable statement: “The Lord has done this for me,”... “In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people”. Both the announcement of Gabriel to Mary and the story of Elizabeth are surrounded by the impossible. Angel Gabriel explains to Mary that **NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD**. Gabriel’s confession finds its deepest meaning here: a barren woman conceives. Elizabeth, an elderly woman is pregnant! Mary, a young teenage girl from very poor background and from a neglected village is highly favoured and regarded.

This is our God who turns things upside down, bringing impossibility into amazing possibility. The uncommon movement of impossibility into possibility was something that Mary could not understand. So her initial response does not

suggest that she simply believed what Gabriel had told her. Before Gabriel could go further, already “Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.” (v 29).

Why was Mary troubled? Well, how many of us have received an angel visitor? So is not common to be visited by an angel. Secondly, why me? Of all people, of all young ladies, who am I? Why am I favoured? How can the Lord be with me? Yes, Mary knows her place, she knows who she is. Moreover, she is a teenager, a she, from the lower tribe, from the wrong side of the tracks. For her, this should not be happening otherwise it would be a reversal, turning things upside down. Why me? In a world where men dominated and women had no vote, were relegated and marginalised. Think of Mary’s case in our world today, our new world of class distinction, a materialistic and competitive world of ours where the parameter for favour regard and favour and respect is based on the amount of wealth that one possesses, the quality, and brand of wears, cars, shoe that one uses.

In our world of economic crisis, wars and violence, it is easier to perceive impossibilities. When all we know in our world, business, relationships, education, work, and etc is impossibility, God’s possibility rings new and true. We need to hear again and again the confession of Gabriel: **NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD.**

Mary therefore moved from being too worried (v 29) to questioning the angel, “How will this be... since I am a virgin?” (v 34), and finally to “I am the Lord’s servant,...may it be to me as you have said.” (v 38). What a wonderful progression, step by step in faith!

I began with the story of how someone felt completely left out completely in our discussion at the table. I am sure that God’s discussion is for everyone at the table. No one is excluded. God is interested in each and every one of us, no matter where we are and what we are.

Mary’s story is a story of radical transformation. It should move us away from what we think we are to what God wants us to be! We have a mission to accomplish; we have a gospel to proclaim. Perhaps, God might be calling us from being observant, quiet and comfortable Christians to real confessing and active Christians here and elsewhere. God might be calling us for something greater than what we are already into. Mary was called from doubt to discipleship, from a poor village girl to mother of God. Nothing is impossible with God. No matter the situation around us, let us believe and trust in him: in one God, the Father Almighty, who humbly put on flesh to share our humanity, Almighty God, born in a manger, Almighty God, yet vulnerable, helpless, and dependent. This is our Christmas faith. Amen.

The Reverend Augustine Nwaekwe