

April 8, 2024 - Annunciation of the Lord

Isaiah 7:10-14; Hebrews 10:4-10; Luke 1:26-38

Homily

On this feast of the Annunciation of the Lord, nine months before the next feast of the Nativity, we celebrate the moment of Jesus' conception in Mary's womb - the first moment of God's human existence. This moment, which divides the whole of human history into two great periods - that before Christ and that after Christ's birth - is, in the Gospels, the subject of various announcements, or "annunciations".

In Matthew's Gospel, there's the announcement to Joseph, which we read on the feast of Saint Joseph. In Luke's Gospel, there are two announcements, one to Zacharias and the other to Mary. One cannot be understood without the other, for in Luke there is a rigorous parallel between the two. In both cases, the same angel Gabriel is sent from God, bearing his message. In the first case, he stands to the right of the altar of incense; in the second, he stands before Mary. In the first case, he is sent to an old man married to an equally old woman - a sterile couple. In the second case, he is sent to a young girl who is engaged but not yet married.

Zechariah's family tree is impressive. He came from a priestly family, from the tribe of Levi, living in Jerusalem, Judea, in the most religious region of Israel. He is a faithful observer of the Law, serving in the Temple and having entered on this very special day for him into the Holy of Holies to offer incense at the time of the evening sacrifice, while the people wait outside. In Mary's case, her own genealogy is not even mentioned, even though she is betrothed to a young man from the tribe of David. She lives in a small village never mentioned in the Old Testament, in Judea, which is not very religious, almost pagan. She is a young girl of no importance.

Zechariah is troubled, and his lack of faith causes him to be mute until the birth of his son. Mary simply asks how "it will be done", and far from being mute, she sings her admirable "Magnificat". Zachariah's mission was to impose the name John on his son - a mission that belonged to the father. But in the case of Jesus, it was his mother Mary who gave him the name "Jesus" revealed to her by the angel. John will certainly be "great in the eyes of the Lord", the greatest of the woman's sons, Jesus will say; but Jesus is the "Son of the Most High". The Holy Spirit will descend upon John after his birth; Jesus is born by the intervention of the Holy Spirit.

This list of points of comparison could be extended. The central idea is that with the moment of Jesus' conception a new era in human history has begun - a new creation replaces the old (to which the double mention of the "sixth month", recalling the first six days of creation, refers).

This new creation began with the conception of Jesus in Mary, the new Eve, mother of all living beings. This is not the end of a story, still less the end of history. On the contrary, it's a new beginning, the start of a period of history to which we belong; the beginning of a transformation of humanity that must continue in our society and in each of our lives.

After Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, many others received an "annunciation" at some point in their lives. The Acts of the Apostles tells us of some of them, dating back to the first Christian community, in particular that of Paul on the road to Damascus. In fact, not only every Christian, but every human being too, receives "visitations" from God throughout his or her life, by "angels of God" - men and women who help them to perceive God's will for them. In particular, there is a moment in every adult human life when the meaning of life here on earth, and the goal towards which it is striving, are revealed in an intuitive and mysterious way.

Today's feast invites us to relive that moment when, as adults, we are born again to ourselves, as Jesus taught Nicodemus - the moment when the meaning of our life here below was revealed to us in the depths of our hearts. It's the moment when we had to say our own Fiat to the birth of God in our existence, and to the entry of our personal existence into the momentum of the Paschal Mystery.

Armand VEILLEUX