

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent – December 19, 2009 (Cycle C) Deacon David Ritter

Before I start with my homily; but in light of the importance of Mary in this Advent season, in our Gospel, in our lives; it seems fitting to me that today, his Holiness Pope Benedict XVI declared Pope John Paul the Great as Venerable – one step closer, Lord willing, to sainthood. His cause was among other documents signed by Benedict XVI on Saturday morning such as decrees declaring Pope Pius XII Venerable, and declaring the martyrdom of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, among others.

Well - Christmas is almost here. As we finish our preparations for the celebration: planning meals, preparing for guests, finish shopping and all the other rushed activities, we sometimes forget why and who we are celebrating; our minds can only handle so much. But it is important, indeed, it is necessary to prepare our souls to truly observe this mystery of faith. We need to live fully, breathe deeply the event of God's birth. In a very real way: it is as important to us as food; because, if we don't open ourselves to the nativity, we spiritually starve ourselves of the joy it brings and we become weaker; and it is as important to us as sleep; because, if we don't open ourselves to the nativity, our souls become foggy and tired and we lose the ability to comprehend the meaning of our celebrations, and our vision of God becomes less clear. And, sadly, I think we see this in the results of the commercialization, and secularization of the 'Christmas Season' in the world today.

The celebration of Christmas is not just some sentimental reminiscence - it foundational to humanity – it opens our minds and hearts to the reason for joy, true joy; the joy of eternal worth, of being loved for who we are, of being part of the heavenly family; without it we could find ourselves in a numbing hopelessness so prevalent today. Today's Gospel is a proclamation of this eternal hope, a heralding of how special we are to God, and it shows us the best way to fully participate in the Nativity by showing us who we should look to, who best helps us in understanding this mystery.

*"How does this happen to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"* Elizabeth says rejoicing. She might as well have said: 'What is so special about me that God should visit me? Who am I that this should happen to me?' You are God's, Elizabeth; you are His beloved. We are all God's beloved, there is no one in the world then, now, or ever that is more special to God than each of you, then any of us; and we should never forget that - He doesn't and neither does Mary. Mary, the tabernacle of the Lord, comes to each of us, brings Christ to each of us through her example, her guidance, her love. As she entered Zechariah's house carrying Christ within her, she does the same with the house of our soul, if we let her. Listen for her, welcome her, let her bring her child of eternal hope and salvation to us and our souls will leap for joy.

Look to Mary, as Elizabeth did, and let Mary show you the meaning of Christmas. She can do it better than anyone. Mary, who Elizabeth greeted with "Blessed are you among women" the exact words that the Archangel Gabriel used; showing us that she is venerated by both men and angels for what she is doing.

Mary, who as (*and today is the first day that we can call him this*) Venerable John Paul, the Great, said: ‘we should emphasize because she is where the beginning of the Incarnation of the Redeemer took place - in her heart, with her “*Here I am*” faithful reply to the divine call.’ – she can show us the genuine meaning of Christmas. Through Mary we can understand the keys to celebrating the mystery of the birth of our God: humility, silence, wonder, joy.

Humility, so that God can find space in our heart, not darkened by pride and arrogance;  
Silence, so that we can hear God talking to us in His continual dialog of love for us;  
Wonder, of God’s gift to us of a simple little child, His child;  
And, the joy this child brings when we allow Him to enter our lives.

So my sisters and brothers, as we go about preparing, planning, making, wrapping, cooking and all the others things we need to do. We need to find that little time of peace and quiet – and use the keys Mary shows us to contemplate this wondrous gift of the birth of God. We need to celebrate along with her, through her eyes, and refresh ourselves with the eternal gift of Joy.

There is a scene in the Movie “The Nativity Story” where Joseph & Mary are leaving Nazareth to travel to Bethlehem for the census. The town is very aware that Mary is pregnant, not by Joseph, and they are looking scornfully at them while busy with their daily activities - wishing them out of their town. They do not want to understand what is about to happen. Joseph sees this, and looking up at Mary on the donkey says: “They are going to miss us!”

My Christmas prayer for all of us is that we don’t become like the townsfolk of Nazareth – that we become like Elizabeth, and John in her womb - that we – we welcome Mary, Joseph and the Christ-child into our homes and hearts.