

From The Pastor

I was most grateful for the warm reception and nicely prepared foods after each of the Masses last weekend for my twenty-fifth anniversary. Thank you to those who planned, prepared, and managed the days. Your time and effort was evident and most appreciated. Thank you to those who took a few minutes to come and say hello and congratulations. I am grateful to those who brought cards and gifts. I suppose, in a way, you hate to really look at these milestones because it demands the admission of the years that have gone by. On the other hand, they have been wonderful years in which I have been richly blest. Thank you for all who have helped make the occasion the rich blessing it was.

Let me also thank those who so generously responded to the Giving Tree with so many coats and sweat shirts for those in need. Many kids in and around the city will have a warm coat, hat, and gloves as they face the elements this winter. Your kindness will not go unnoticed.

The food collection has also been a great success. I am proud that so many of you brought so much food so that others could have a good Christmas meal. We will buy hams Monday, and prepare six baskets for our families. Any leftovers will be prepared for other families or sent to a near by food depot. May God bless you for your goodness to so many others.

These weeks of Advent have found us expressing the themes of 'story', and 'pondering'. We are resting in and being enriched by the story of our salvation that never seems to grow old. We are pondering the mysteries that God has revealed to us through the words and images of the Advent readings. Today's gospel is one of the most familiar stories at the core of our faith tradition. Its main character, Mary herself, is the one who teaches us to ponder with open hearts even those things that trouble us and that seem impossible.

What did Mary learn from the encounter with the angel, and what might we learn? First, I take note that the angel has a name: Gabriel. This personal messenger of the Lord has an identity with God to serve a purpose of infinite importance. Most angels in scripture play a role, but remain unnamed. Because this mission is so important and essential to God's plan for us, the angel to Mary is honored with a name: Gabriel, 'God's strength'.

Next, the angel knows something about Mary she does not know about herself. Addressing Mary, Gabriel says, "Hail, full of grace. The Lord is with you". "You have found favor with God". Huh, what? Who, me? Full of grace? Favor with God? What does that mean? Mary is troubled by these words and must ponder what they could mean.

Mary is not the only one who is surprised by these words. The words are addressed, ultimately, to each us. Huh, me, full of grace? How can this be? God knows my name? God likes me, and shows me his favor? Yes, indeed it is true. The favor and blessing shown to Mary is the grace and favor given to us all through the birth and life of Jesus.

Grace can be described as the love of God. It is God's gift of love, and personal communication to each and all of his people. For those who ponder this great gift, it becomes deeply known in our inner self. To ponder such a gift is to realize that it is an inner knowing, an inner awareness of the presence of God within ourselves. This is what Mary learned and realized that allowed her to say yes to God's will for her.

Through the encounter with the angel, Mary learns of a new and deeper identity within herself: the presence of God. No longer a faithful young woman who merely follows the way of her faith, Mary now knows that in the depth of her being God has made a home. It is true for you and me as well.

Realizing the action of God, Mary is able to open herself to mysteries that are infinitely beyond herself. I doubt Mary could define the Holy Spirit for us, but she could say with great confidence and clarity her experience of being touched by the Spirit. Mary moves from the limitations of the flesh to the possibility of the Spirit. (How can this be, I do not know man?) Mary is a spiritual temple who will bring forth the Spirit and the life of God in the Word made Flesh. God, in the power of the Spirit, accepts human flesh through the young virgin.

This mystery is not for Mary alone. The Christmas feast we celebrate later this week is one that includes every human being. By the power of the Holy Spirit, through the person of Jesus, we have all found favor with God. 'Favor' hardly does the reality justice. We have been given the dignity and redemption to share the divine life. No longer separated from God through the death of sin, we can joyfully ponder the great mercy and new life that is ours in Christ Jesus. If, for some reason, you think this does not include you, you are wrong. You are full of grace, and have found great favor with God. Your failures and sins will not defeat this surpassing gift. Ponder this truth. It is who we are, and what we profess as followers of Jesus.

A very blessed and Merry Christmas to each of you.
Father John Esper