

- My dear friends, Christmas is very near! We are now celebrating the 4th and final Sunday before the great and glorious feast of Christmas! Christ's coming is imminent!
- While most of us are probably close to being ready for Christmas by having our homes decorated, our gifts purchased, and our Christmas cards mailed, we must now ask ourselves if we are spiritually prepared for this great feast.
- In other words, have we made the most of this Advent season in order to prepare to receive the Christ child anew in our hearts, and are we prepared to greet our Lord when He comes again in glory at the *parousia*?
- In order to further prepare us for the coming of Jesus, the readings today call us to focus our attention on the virtue of humility, and they remind us, as well, of the sometimes paradoxical nature of our Christian faith.
- In today's readings there are three images of humility that we should meditate upon. And while humble, each is used paradoxically by our Lord to show forth His greatness.
- First, in the reading from Prophet Micah, we hear of the humble nature of Bethlehem, which is said to be "too small to be among the clans of Judah." Yet, paradoxically, from this little town will come the Savior of the world.
- By human standards we might expect that the Messiah should come from Jerusalem or some other great and powerful city. Yet in choosing Bethlehem, a small and insignificant town, our Lord chooses quite the opposite.
- The second image is that of Elizabeth in the Gospel. Scripture records that Elizabeth was barren and advanced in years. Being barren in Jesus' day was a sign of disfavor with God. It wasn't simply a physical condition but also was understood to be a disgrace.
- Yet though Elizabeth would have been a target of ridicule and scorn in her day, it is from this barren and elderly lady that John the Baptist will come, of whom Christ Himself said that of those born of woman, John the Baptist is the greatest.
- Lastly, we must also focus our attention on our Lady, who is the very embodiment of humility. She was a simple and humble virgin from the obscure town of Nazareth, yet it was she who was called to be the Mother of God.
- And Mary's humility is so great that when she is greeted by Gabriel's *Ave*, when she is called *full of grace*, she does not recognize the incredible grace that has been at work in her soul since her conception. Yet once it is explained to her, Mary humbly accepts it.
- A proud person would have refused God in this moment, but Mary simply accepts by saying: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."
- On a natural level, not Bethlehem, nor Elizabeth, nor Mary could ever be called great by their own merits. In the eyes of the world, each would be considered small and insignificant. Yet by the workings of grace, each holds a revered place in the history of man's salvation.
- The beauty of these readings is that they prepare us to accept the utter paradox of the mystery of the Incarnation: that God Almighty, the One in Whom and through Whom all things were made, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, He who is infinite in every way, humbles Himself to become man, a finite and limited creature.
- And not only does He choose to become simply a man, but our Lord comes to earth not as a mighty warrior or great king as one might expect. In His humility He comes as a tiny and helpless child.

- And yet even as a babe, He is not born amongst wealth and splendor and luxury. Rather, He chooses to be born in the cruel comforts of a cave, a cave He must share with animals, and the bed upon which He is laid is a manger, the feeding trough of the animals.
- The point, my friends, is that when it comes to the mysteries of our faith, things are not always as they might seem at first glance. And if we are to glean the full fruit of these mysteries we hold dear, then we must be humble enough to accept the ways of the Lord.
- We must be willing to look with the eyes of faith to see things in a new and different light. We must be willing to see things as God sees them. We must be willing to look beyond the surface meaning to see the inner workings of grace.
- Take our Gospel story as an example. We tend to think of the Visitation as the meeting of the two mothers, but it's more importantly the meeting of Jesus and John the Baptist.
- While it is true that they are cousins, and thus have a familial connection, the relationship of Jesus and John is much more significant than the common blood they share. And thus this meeting is of greater importance than the mere meeting of family members.
- This meeting is the meeting of the Christ and the one who is to be His herald. Elizabeth's salutation to Mary is the salutation of the mother of the herald to the mother of the King whose path the herald is destined to prepare.
- But this meeting is more than a meeting between Mary and Elizabeth or between Jesus and John the Baptist. It's also a meeting of the two covenants of salvation history. This is an historic and epic event within the economy of salvation!
- In today's second reading from Hebrews we hear about the two covenants. The old covenant relied upon sacrifices and sin offerings that had to be repeated, and with only limited efficacy.
- In contrast, in the new covenant there is only one sacrifice, the sacrifice of Jesus Himself, a sacrifice with unlimited efficacy that totally replaces the old covenant.
- Thus, Jesus' coming as man changes everything for those who choose to believe in Him! His coming ushers in a new covenant of salvation between God and His people, a covenant that totally supplants the old covenant.
- In today's Gospel these two covenants come face to face. We see in Elizabeth and John a representation of the old covenant, while Mary and Jesus represent the new covenant.
- The sublimity of this event is not lost on Elizabeth either. Her words: "And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" show a recognition of the Messiah living within the womb of her kinswoman. And in the action of John leaping in the womb we see the subordination of the old covenant to the new and superior covenant.
- Yet if we are to see this event or any of the major events of our salvation history as they truly are, then we must be humble and childlike. In fact, Jesus Himself tells us in the Gospel of Matthew that we must become like children if we wish to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.
- My dear friends in Christ, when it comes to the mysteries of our faith, things are not always as they seem. Hidden beneath the tattered veil of our humanity and our societal norms are great and beautiful mysteries.
- But to see them and understand them, we must be humble and childlike. Humility is the key that opens the door to the depths of our faith.
- As we make our way through these final days before the coming of our Lord in the Incarnation, let us pray that we may each be truly humble enough to grasp fully the mysteries that are about to be revealed to us at Christmas.
- And in fully grasping the mysteries of our faith, may we come to love our Lord and His mother all the more.