

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2018

+

The Holy Land is a tiny piece of real estate. Some of you who have been there know that. Where we talk about Boston to San Diego, Israel's counterpart is the Biblical "from Dan to Beersheba." It's a distance of 150 miles. From Boston, 150 miles gets you to Albany. Our Lady traveled about *half* that distance to visit her old cousin Elizabeth. The one-way journey probably took three days, and unlike the famous advertising statement of the Cunard Steamship Company, getting there was *not* half the fun!

The Gospel however tells us Mary went *with haste*. She didn't wait the few weeks it might take to verify she was indeed pregnant. Like the patriarch Abraham, Mary *believed God*, and "it was counted to her as righteousness." Added to that was Mary's focus on Elizabeth. The Blessed Virgin realized her cousin's joy at the prospect of becoming a mother in old age. Elizabeth was six months pregnant, and Mary might have been resentful she had not been informed earlier. But one of the characteristics of being *full of grace* is you don't let these things bother you! Full of joy for her old cousin, Mary made the journey across half the country to share Elizabeth's joy and congratulate her.

That is so different from what we do! When two of us meet, more often each is determined to tell his own story. We listen with half an ear, waiting for the moment to interrupt and tell what *we've* been doing. When Mary made her house call it was not that way. Our Blessed Lady put her own exciting *and Divine* news aside and thought only of Elizabeth. Here was this girl, to whom it had recently been revealed she is the elect of God. But Mary was not considering her own status, giving no thought to the idea she was too grand to visit her less-favored relative. "All generations will call me blessed" is pretty heady stuff! But there was no "let her come to me" notion in Mary. And the prospect of spending three days on the back of a mule did not dissuade the Mother of God from her intended kindness.

How different that also is from us! Most of the time, we are able to be good-natured and friendly if it does not put us out of the way. How often we draw the line at anything involving demand or trouble. We say "no one would expect me to do that" as a way of trying to quiet the conscience of a person who did expect precisely that very thing.

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2018

+

The meeting of Mary and Elizabeth is called *The Visitation*, and it would have been wonderful to be a fly on the wall. Remember there was no cell phone or e-mail to announce the visit. Mary's arrival was a wonderful, but unexpected, surprise. And before this girl could even say, "Hi, Elizabeth, it's me, your cousin Mary" John the Baptist, pointing the way to Christ even in the womb, spills the beans! For Scripture says John "leapt for joy at the presence of Jesus." And in a flash of Ghostly intuition, Elizabeth connected the dots. Forgoing conventional niceties, the old lady cut to the chase and blurted out, "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." Elizabeth's humility is as striking as Mary's.

No cell phone announced the visit, and no one had a *Kodak* camera either! But artists have always been captivated and inspired by the significance of the meeting. There is a glazed terra cotta of *The Visitation* by Della Robbia showing Elizabeth, her old face showing wonder and love, kneeling and gazing up at young Mary. And the girl has no embarrassment on her face, as her hands rest on her old cousin's shoulders. Looking at the terra cotta you know this isn't just an intergenerational event or a bonding moment between two women with first-time pregnancies! It is the holy communion of the two most highly honored women in history. Mary and Elizabeth are two supreme examples of the virtue of faith. Well indeed is *The Visitation* counted among the Joyful Mysteries. And the cause of joy is the unseen yet present Lord Jesus. Lying hidden in Mary's womb, Jesus is the author of the happiness in these souls, John included. It is Jesus Who makes all the difference in their lives. That is the good news.

The even better news for us is this is the way God works as a result of the Incarnation. Ever since Mary said *yes*, God is in the flesh. And we who partake of the Holy Food of His Body and Blood carry Jesus into our daily lives where He also makes no sign of His presence but for the examples of the faith in us. The way God worked in the Visitation is the way He works still. If we are conscious God is in us, if our spirit rejoices like Mary's, if in humility we give thanks for His loving kindness to us, then Jesus unseen continues to make His presence felt and hearts rejoice wherever we go. Is that a tall order? Coming from the Lord's Table we

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2018

+

cannot help bearing Jesus with us. So remember as you go, His nature is always to communicate that same joy and peace felt long ago by Blessed Mary, her cousin Elizabeth, and the unborn but alive John the Baptist.