Dear Friends,

**Visitation - World's First Eucharistic Procession!**

It is traditionally believed that Mary received the message of Elizabeth’s pregnancy while residing at her home in Nazareth. The village of Ein Karem is considered the traditional birthplace of John the Baptist. Ein Karem is situated on the western slopes of Jerusalem. Ein Karem is approximately 5 miles southwest of present-day downtown Jerusalem. It is approximately 80 miles from Nazareth. Luke implies Mary traveled alone, but most likely she traveled with a caravan for safety. The home of Elizabeth is about 2,474 feet above sea level, while Nazareth is at 1,138 feet. She journeyed through Galilee, Samaria, the Jordan River Valley, and finally through the hills of Judea. This means Mary had to trek uphill nearly 1,336 feet in elevation!

Mary’s journey to visit Elizabeth had enormous significance for Luke’s Jewish and Gentile readers. It showed them that Mary’s womb was truly the locale of God’s presence. This story suggests a mysterious parallel between Mary’s journey into the hill country and the movement of the Ark of the Covenant to the same locale on its way to Jerusalem (II Samuel, Chapter 6). Both the Ark and Mary are greeted with “shouts of joy;” both are sources of joy for the households into which they enter; both the Ark and Mary remain in the hill country for three months. King David’s sacred leaping and dancing before the Ark (2 Samuel 6:12) could be compared to John’s stirring, or, more literally, leaping (eskirtesin) for joy in Elizabeth’s womb. In the same way that King David had leapt and danced with joy in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant, so John is leaping and dancing within the confines of Elizabeth’s womb. As a temporary vessel housing the immanent presence of God, Mary appears to fulfill the same purpose as the Ark of the Covenant. What the Ark of the Covenant could only signify (and only in a local way), Mary makes a reality, in a personal and universal way: Mary with her Child is an effective sign of God’s presence with His people. The Jewish Christians believed that God dwelt in the Temple in Jerusalem, but now, the evangelist tells them, God is present in Mary. Like the Ark of the Covenant, God is journeying throughout His land, visiting His chosen people, and blessing them with His presence. As Ark of the New Covenant, Mary is the model par excellence of what every believer is called to be, the dwelling place of the Divine presence on earth.

Pope Benedict XVI has written that the Visitation is more than just a trip into the country for a young girl from Nazareth. As he explains, when Mary “set out in haste” to visit her cousin Elizabeth, she embarked on the world’s first Eucharistic procession. She carried Christ into the world. She was a living tabernacle. And so it is that her cousin became the first to experience Eucharistic adoration, and to share in the first Benediction. “Blessed are you,” she says to Mary. “Blessed is the fruit of your womb. Blessed are you who believed.” Three times, she speaks the word “Blessed.” I can’t help but be reminded of our own Benediction, when the bells ring three times, and then we chant the divine praises: “Blessed be God...”

In his commentary on this episode of visitation, William Barclay remarks that blessedness confers on a person both the greatest joy and the greatest task in the world. Nowhere can we see the paradox better than in Mary’s life. Mary was granted the blessedness and privilege of being the mother of the Son of God. Yet, that very blessedness was to be a sword to pierce her heart: one day she would see her Son hanging on a cross. So, to be chosen by God is often both a crown of joy and a cross of sorrow. God does not choose us for a life of ease and comfort, but to use us, with our free, loving consent, for His purposes. We can make a real difference in the lives of others by carrying Jesus to them. However, we cannot give what we do not possess. Christmas is the ideal time for us to be filled with the spirit of Christ, allowing His rebirth within us. Thus, Jesus enables us to share His love with all whom we encounter by offering them humble, loving, committed service, unconditional forgiveness, and compassionate care. Sharing Jesus with others is the best Christmas gift we can give.

Be blessed.

Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.

December 19, 2021
FIRST READING
You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah
too small to be among the
clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel.
(Mi 5:1)

PSALM
Lord, make us turn to you; let us see
your face and we shall be saved.
(Ps 80)

SECOND READING
“Then I said, ‘As is written of me
in the scroll,
behold, I come to do your will,
O God.’” (Heb 10:7)

GOSPEL
“Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of
your womb.
And how does this happen to me,
that the mother of my Lord should
come to me?” (Lk 1:42-43)


WORSHIP & MEDITATION

WE ARE GOD’S INSTRUMENTS

GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

St. Augustine tells us that a “Christian is a mind through which Christ thinks, a heart through which Christ loves, a voice through which Christ speaks and a hand through which Christ helps.” As we look around and out at the world, we do not have to search too far before we come face to face with inequity and injustice. There is so much unfairness, prejudice, anger, hatred, violence, and want. The stories of human heartache, people being hurt, deprived of life’s necessities, loneliness, and sickness are far too commonplace. For many of the world’s ills, the vices of greed, lust, pride, gluttony, and jealousy are clearly among the more significant root causes.

Why doesn’t God just step in and fix this mess? After all, God created this world, and one would hope that he would step up and take some measure of responsibility for it! Once we sit with this thinking for a while, we can begin to realize just how flawed it really is. God did take responsibility and God did fix the problem! God sent us Jesus Christ as the divine solution to the world’s ills. It is not God who has shirked responsibility, we have. We are the ones who continually fail to set our own personal needs, wants, and securities aside so that One more powerful than us can use us.

Mary had to set her needs aside in order for the Son of God to come into the world. Put simply, Mary listened and believed. Having opened herself to being an instrument of the Divine, God could use her as his mind, heart, voice, and hand. She became God’s vessel so that God’s greatness could reach the ends of the earth and peace could come upon the world. God’s fix for the world’s difficulties is you and me. We are the ones who confess that Jesus Christ came into the world as the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, and herald of justice. All we have to do is believe, as did Mary, that what has been spoken to us by the Lord will be fulfilled. Then, we can step aside and be the Christians we claim to be. What a difference it would make if every person who professed to be Christian truly understood that their one and only vocation is to be God’s instrument. What a beautiful, equitable, and just world it would be.
The first reading: Mic 5:1 - 4

Micah, an eighth century prophet, decries the sins of both Israel and Judah and foretells the downfall of both. Although most of this short book deals with the shadow side of Israelite life, his prediction of the future Son of David presents an interesting and striking contrast. The prophet singles out the home town of David, Bethlehem or Ephrathah (Ru 4:11), located in Judah, as the place of hope. It was in Bethlehem that Jesse, David’s father, lived and David and his brothers were raised (1 Sam 17:12). The town was small and otherwise insignificant (v1). Its importance lay in the fact that as David’s home it was the geographical point of origin for the future Messiah. There is no inference in Micah that the Messiah need be born there, although Matthew and Luke will place Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. The emergence of the Messiah is part of God’s plan from an early stage. Verse 2 is a parenthesis indicating that the period of exile and separation will last until the Messiah’s birth, at which time the dispersed population will once again be restored to its homeland.

Unlike past monarchs who had incurred God’s wrath (3:9f), the future king, empowered and fortified by the Lord, will be solicitous for the good of his people (vv3f). His rule will be permanent and universal. With the end of all conflict, he will be identified as peace itself (v4).

The second reading: 

The letter to the Hebrews was written for the benefit of Jewish converts to Christianity. When their old friends turned them out of synagogue and Temple, they missed the institutions of Judaism, especially the Law, the priesthood and the Temple rituals and sacrifices. Hence, Paul gives them the assurance that it is Christ and their relationship with Him in the Church which replaces and improves upon everything they’ve been asked to give up. In today’s passage, Jesus is said to have quoted Psalm 40 which explains his mission: “to do his Father’s will” in the world. Paul explains that the meaning of the Incarnation is summarized in the words, “Behold, I come to do your will.” More than anything else, it is Jesus’ determination to discover God’s will and carry it out that actually saves us. True Faith entails doing God’s will, carrying out God’s commands in our everyday lives. Unfortunately, however, it is often not God’s will that we seek. Instead, we make idols of our jobs, our spouses, our children, our wealth, our social standing, and our bodies. Hence, Paul reminds us that Christ took a body so as to have an instrument through which He would be able to offer this sacrifice of perfect, loving obedience to the will of God. “You have prepared a body for me… Behold I said, I come to do your will.” This means that our bodies are the meeting place of God and human beings. That is why, as a believing community, we take our bodies seriously. We wash them in the waters of Baptism; anoint them with holy oil to seal them in the Holy Spirit; and feed them with Bread from Heaven. In addition, when we are ill, we ask the priest to anoint our bodies with holy oil. When we die, we honor our bodies with Christian burial. (http://netministries.org).

GOSPEL INSIGHTS

In this Lucan account of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, the two covenants meet. As in the infancy narrative as a whole, the central figures are the offspring to be born, Jesus and John. Up to this point in the narrative, the accounts of the two have been paired but separate. At this point they are joined.

The story is replete with theological significance. As John leaps in his mother’s womb, the inferior recognizes the superior (v44). It is reminiscent of the pre-natal activity of Rebekah’s sons, Jacob and Esau, with its own distinct note of inequality (Gen 25:22f). In addition, Elizabeth defers to Mary throughout the narrative. John’s role as precursor is underscored as Elizabeth’s recognition of the salvific event is due to John’s response within her (v44). The one who has conceived at an advanced age is overshadowed by the one who has conceived without a human procreator.

A second point to be noted is the meeting of the two covenants, with Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John representing the old dispensation, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, the new. The faithful Israel, as seen in the person of Elizabeth, gives a “spirit filled” (v41) recognition of the Messiah and acclaims him Lord (v43), a faith statement to be understood in the light of the church’s post-Easter experience. Elizabeth further notes the favored state of both Mary and the child (v42) in words later included in the “Hail Mary.” Mary’s blessedness rests primarily in her having believed what God had revealed to her (1:25 - 38).

This encomium directed to Mary by Elizabeth will be reflected by the former in her song of praise, the Magnificat (vv46 - 55). Everything has been accomplished by the action of God to whom alone praise is due; Mary expresses the spirit of the anawim, “the poor of God”. This is well expressed by the visit itself; it is Mary who goes to Elizabeth in a spirit of deference, not vice versa. The concept of the anawim is a major theme in Luke’s gospel.

The episode of the visitation in its simplicity and domesticity, so skillfully developed by Luke, also points to the humble origins of the Promised One of the ages.
What the infancy narratives are all about is a subject of contention. The most considered and delicate judgments can be found in the commentaries of Raymond E. Brown, SS. Yet no matter what we make of these accounts of Jesus’ origins, they reveal that his “yes” was made possible only by an earlier act of trust. The Virgin believed that greatness would be worked out of her own life, her own womb. She believed the promise of God and, in doing so, gave birth to the promise.

The Gospel story of the Visitation is a wondrous convergence of insignificance and portent. Two cousins greet, one running to assist the other, both pregnant with life and faith. The hidden unborn quickens the triumph of faith in Elizabeth who, despite all appearances, recognizes in Mary the mother of her Lord: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ... The moment your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby stirred in my womb for joy.”

The secret encounter of these hitherto unknown women announces the future course not only of four lives, but of the world. When I read this Gospel, I often imagine the women of the Visitation; not those two in the hill country of Judah, but those in our midst. They are a religious community that by worldly measure is not only hidden, but too small and fragile to have a future. Yet in the scope of eternity, greater works may be done in their hearts than in the plans and projects of mayors and managers who deem their own roles strategic. Politicians come and go; smug party operatives assume the throne of pride and prominence. But somehow it is the fragile and silent that live on.

And what could be more fragile and quiet than two unborn children? Surely we in this abortion culture know that much. The child before birth is voiceless and vulnerable. Those who are small and insignificant are simply that: not big and not important. They can easily be expunged from our personal thoughts and our political discourse. But with hope, with trust, with patience—gifts of the pregnant mother—life is born again in every child yessed into life.

Any mother who has ever been with child in faith, who has ever been pregnant in hope, has rushed to the friend, the compatriot, the spouse, the family and announced the good news. The promise is terribly precarious. Anything can happen, suddenly, brusquely, and definitively. But the hope remains, and over time faith’s long labor yields life.

In some ways, I think, God is most appropriately thought of as a mother. What an act of courage it takes to complete the task. What a demand upon the ego, one’s time, one’s plans, one’s privacy. There can never again be a thought of oneself alone. One’s world is now invaded by the invitations and intrusions of the unplanned visitor, the unexpected guest. Pregnancy is the emergence of the other within, an other which is one with oneself, but not oneself. All love is borne this way. Visitation is not only the paradigm of God in our lives. It is also the way we enter each other.

John Kavanaugh SJ

QUIZ TIME

1. **Whom did Mary go to visit?**
   A) Her mother  B) Joseph  C) Elizabeth  D) Her teacher

2. **What did the baby do in Elizabeth’s womb when Mary came?**
   A) Leaped in her womb  B) Went to sleep  C) Was born  D) Cried out loud

3. **Elizabeth was filled with ———— when she honored Mary?**
   A) Sadness  B) Confusion  C) The Holy Spirit  D) Too much food

4. **Where was the house of Elizabeth?**
   A) Near Bethlehem  B) Near Jerusalem  C) In Nazareth  D) Near Jericho

5. **What was the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth?**
   A) They were sisters  B) They were cousins  C) They were in-laws  D) They were childhood friends

**QUIZ ANSWERS**

1C, 2A, 3C, 4B, 5B

Any Questions?

1. **Recall some of the prophesies about the Messiah in the Old Testament?**

2. **What lessons can you gather from the story of the Visitation?**

3. **“Script read” the visitation and discuss the content of the dialogue between Mary and Elizabeth? When did you have such a conversation with another person?**