

Well, our Lord reminds us through today's Liturgy of the Word that one of the great themes of Advent and Christmas is *smallness*. Advent and Christmas remind us that the glorious power of God tends to be expressed *precisely through* smallness, humility, and lowliness. In the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Micah, the Lord declares that out of all the nations on earth and all of the kingdoms in the ancient world, He chooses the *small, powerless, and seemingly insignificant* nation of Israel to bear the Messiah, the Savior of the human race.

God the Father certainly could've chosen any of the powerful empires, civilizations, or kingdoms of the ancient world to bring forth His Son and manifest His great power: the Romans, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Persians, the Chinese, etc. Yet, the Lord chooses Israel, *a small and lowly nation*—a nation conquered repeatedly by foreign powers such as the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and at the time of the birth of Christ in the first century AD, is controlled and occupied by the powerful Roman Empire.

In the second reading, we see that in the Incarnation, the Son of God, through the *smallness* of humility and obedience to the Father,

lovingly takes up the mission of redemption in order to save us.

Brothers and sisters, we were essentially saved by *humility and obedience*—the humility and obedience of the Son of God to our Heavenly Father and *His* plan of salvation. As one biblical commentary put it, “The will of the Father was the focus of the Son’s mission in life, *even* to the point of death.” In other words, *through Christ*, God teaches us that conforming our will to the will of the Father, will *always* end in victory and triumph, no matter the obstacle.

In today’s Gospel, the theme of smallness is continued in the account of the Visitation of Mary to her older cousin Elizabeth. Both women are miraculously pregnant by the saving will of the Father. And the Visitation is such a fascinating event. First, it’s important to note that geographically, the hill country of Judea where Elizabeth and Zechariah lived is about 80 miles south from Nazareth, which is where Mary is from and it’s where the Annunciation took place. According to a tradition that goes back to the 4th century AD, Elizabeth’s house was in what is now the village of Ain-Karim in Israel. In the summer of 2015, I was blessed to travel to the Holy Land as part of a pilgrimage of

seminarians and so we visited Ain-Karim and the beautiful Church of the Visitation that was built on the site of Elizabeth's house.

So considering the sheer distance from Mary's home in Nazareth to Ain-Karim, this would've certainly been a difficult trip for Mary. I can tell you first-hand having been to the Holy Land that even *by bus*, it would take a while by *modern standards* to get from one town/city to another, especially from Nazareth to Ain-Karim. And so in the 1st century AD, it would've taken a good amount of time for Mary to visit Elizabeth and given the hot Middle Eastern climate and the fact that Mary would have traveled by caravan using donkeys or camels, this was not a "simple, easy trip to grandma's house."

We're told in the Gospel that once Mary arrives and greets Elizabeth, the baby inside Elizabeth's womb, St. John the Baptist, leaped for joy! This is fascinating because the *first person* to truly encounter Jesus outside of his own parents, is *a pre-born child*—a small, defenseless pre-born baby. Again, there's a definite *smallness* here.

After Mary greets Elizabeth, we hear St. Elizabeth speak those beautiful words of the "Hail Mary": "Blessed are you among women,

and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” And then Elizabeth says something profound—she says: “And how does this happen to me, that the *mother of my Lord* should come to me?” In a way, Elizabeth, “filled with the Holy Spirit” we’re told, is one of the first human beings, if not *the* first, to refer to Mary specifically as “the Mother of God.” In saying this, Elizabeth is affirming the twin realities of Jesus’ own divinity and Mary’s divine maternity.

And lastly, Elizabeth proclaims to her young cousin Mary, “Blessed are *you who believed* that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.” In other words, not only is Elizabeth praising Mary’s faith at the Annunciation, but she’s also implicitly criticizing her own husband Zechariah, who was struck dumb by the Angel Gabriel because he *didn’t believe* the message that was given to him regarding the conception and birth of his son, John. Elizabeth’s explicit praise of Mary’s faith at the Annunciation confirms the difference in the responses to the Angel Gabriel between Mary and Zechariah—Mary responded with great faith, while Zechariah responded with doubt.

Throughout the Visitation, we see the theme of “smallness” displayed through the pre-born children of Jesus and his cousin John, but we also see “smallness” displayed so beautifully in our Blessed Mother Mary. The general consensus among scholars and historians is that at the time of the Annunciation, Mary was probably 15 years old and in first century Roman Palestine, it was common and a general practice for Jewish girls to get engaged and married at such a young age.

You know, God could’ve easily chosen some famous, powerful, and well-known queen or princess of one of the great kingdoms of the ancient world to be His Mother, but He didn’t. Instead, God chose this *totally unknown, young, teenaged peasant girl* from the *small, insignificant* town of Nazareth, located in the small, powerless nation of Israel to be His Mother—the Mother of God—the Mother of the Savior of all humanity. So really, everything about Mary screams “smallness.”

As the Mother of God—the Mother of our Savior—Mary teaches us precisely *how* to celebrate Christmas. Mary teaches us that it is by *smallness*, by a humble and receptive heart, that we will receive the greatest gift ever bestowed upon the human race: the gift of God

Himself, the gift of eternal salvation. A gift can only be enjoyed if we are *first willing* to receive the gift. A gift, *by its very nature, requires* receptivity, which is the willingness to receive. And so through her great faith and humble receptivity, Mary teaches us how to receive Her Son Jesus, our Savior, Who *is the greatest gift we could ever receive*.

As we prepare to worship and receive Mary's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in the *great smallness* of the Most Holy Eucharist, which is a continuation of God's paradoxical smallness at Christmas, let us ask the Lord to purify our free will, so that we may receive Him with open hearts and minds at Christmas and allow Him to further transform our life.