

Fourth Sunday of Advent, C – December 23, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 785 words

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce her divine motherhood, he greeted her with a singular salutation: “Hail, full of grace”. The word used in Greek is unique in the entire Bible; no one had ever been called that – or greeted that way – before. And no one would ever be greeted that way again. But when Elizabeth greets Mary in today’s gospel – the scene of the Visitation – she calls her “blessed among women”. And this greeting had been used before – at least two other times in Sacred Scripture.<sup>1</sup> We should see if there is a connection that can be drawn between those passages.

When we look them up, we learn that those who were also called “blessed among women” were, in fact, heroines of great courage. First there was the woman named Jael, mentioned in the Book of Judges as the one who killed Sisera, the commander of an enemy army. Sisera had oppressed Israel for some 20 years.<sup>2</sup> Jael lured him into her husband’s tent, gave him warm milk to make him sleepy, then dispatched him with a tent peg through the temple. The judge of Israel, whose name was Deborah, sang Jael’s praises, calling her “blessed among women”.<sup>3</sup> Her heroic act obtained 40 years of peace for Israel.<sup>4</sup>

Then there was Judith. We read about her in the Old Testament book that bears her name. She was a wealthy widow, noted for her beauty – and also for her strength.<sup>5</sup> She used her beauty and charm to win the confidence of Holofernes, the commander of an enemy army, who was a great threat to Israel. Then she used her strength to behead him and so save the day. This scene is actually the rather gruesome subject of many famous paintings, including one by the great Caravaggio. Because of her heroic act, Uzziah, king of Judah, declared her also to be “blessed among women”.<sup>6</sup> And Israel was given peace.<sup>7</sup>

Our Blessed Mother, therefore, takes her place – thanks to Elizabeth’s greeting – in a line of courageous women who obtain salvation for Israel. But there is a notable difference her case: she will not overcome the enemy by shedding blood herself. Blood would be shed, but not at her hands; rather, it would be at her consent. Her own Son would be the victim, and she would consent to his sacrifice as the nails were driven through his hands and feet – rather like Jael’s tent peg –, and as the sword pierced his side and his heart. Only a woman of the greatest courage could accomplish that; she was truly “blessed among women”.

Our Blessed Mother thus closes one long chapter in the history of God’s people – that of the bloody killing of one’s earthly enemies – and opens a new era of peace, brought about by the blood, not of the enemy, but of her Son. Her consent made that possible. And thus was fulfilled the word about the Messiah of our first reading: “He shall be peace”. The peace of Christ is one that no weapon – no amount of killing – can ever obtain for us. And so our second reading places these words on Jesus’ lips: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.... behold, I come to do your will, O God.”

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent we prepare to welcome the Prince of Peace into our midst. The Son of God comes into this world in human form to do his Father’s will and save us from our enemies, the greatest of which is sin. And Our Lady, filled with a faith that sees beyond conventional wisdom, stands patiently by as her Son fulfills this mission. She does not take

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Fr. Richard Finn, O.P., for a homily of his that contained this central insight.

<sup>2</sup> See Judges 4:3.

<sup>3</sup> Judges 5:24.

<sup>4</sup> See Judges 5:31.

<sup>5</sup> See Judith 8:7.

<sup>6</sup> Judith 13:18.

<sup>7</sup> See Judith 16:25.

matters into her own hands. No, she consents – she always did: “Be it done unto me according to thy word” was her life-motto. And so Elizabeth pronounced another blessing over her: “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled”.

As we make our final preparations for the feast of Christmas, let us commend our own quest for peace to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She courageously stands by her Son and is able to obtain for us that which we could never get through our own efforts. See how, immediately after she conceived Christ, she brought him in haste to Elizabeth; she will bring Jesus to us, also – even if she must travel through “hill country”, through the ups and downs of our lives, to reach us. We can never fail by entrusting ourselves to her care. And may we, like Elizabeth and John, go out to meet her and our Lord with joy.