

Fourth Sunday of Advent
20 December 2020

The Vimeo recording can be found [here](#)



Jesse Tree, Lambeth Bible © Lambeth Palace Library

Lectionary

2 Samuel 7.1—5, 8—12, 16; Romans 16:25—27; Luke 1.26—38

First Reading

2 Samuel 7.1-5, 8-12, 16

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, ‘See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.’ Nathan said to the king, ‘Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.’ But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in?

Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

Second Reading
Romans 16.25-27

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever! Amen.

The Gospel Reading

St Luke 1.26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Dear Friends

Welcome. This week I want to do something a little different, more by way of a short lectio divina than a homily. And that is because this week we really cannot look only at the Gospel reading almost in isolation. All three readings so clearly belong together, and illuminate together, one of the golden threads that runs through the Scriptures.

Many parishes will treat this week, so close to Christmas, as a kind of unofficial feast of the Virgin Mary. She is always at the heart of the lectionary for the last Sunday before Christmas, so it is easy simply to preach a sermon on the Virgin Mary. And that will be fine; but I think the readings ask a little more from us, at least this year.

You will find on the document that accompanies this recording all three readings written out; you may have them on a sheet from your local church, or in your missal. But if you need to read direct from your Bibles the readings for this week are 2 Samuel 7.1—5, 8—12, 16; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1.26—38

Lectio Divina

1

We start in the House of King David in our first reading. King David has a bad conscience. Compared to him, living in a palace, the ark of God (the 'throne of God's presence among his

people), is in a mere tent. Therefore King David decides to do what most kings of nations do: build their God an imposing dwelling-place.

However, God intervenes! And he does so with words both *criticizing* David's decision and *promising* something more. David is quite forgetting says God, that he (God) built up David's entire kingdom so far. From the moment when he made the young shepherd into a king by anointing him, God has stood by him, fought his battles, protected him through to all his victories, and shown him the way to go.

But this grace extends *even farther*. The *real* house that God has begun to build will be brought to conclusion in David's lifetime, for him to enjoy; but in his descendants. Indeed it will come to fulfilment ultimately in David's Great Heir, the famous 'Son of David'. In him David's dynasty will find its fulfilment and its *perfection*. *This is the essential point*. God says, 'David who are *you* to build *me* a house? I have been building *your* house! But, at the same time, I have also been building *myself* a house. But it is not the kind of place *you* would build for me. *I build in human lives*: in men and women who believe and who love. They are my temples, and they will never fall into ruins.'

The house God was building for David would continue through the generations to Jesus Christ. This house will be fulfilled in the Gospel.

2

This is the essential backdrop for the Gospel passage. A poor virgin girl from a Jerusalemite family, betrothed to a man from the house of David, is chosen by God to become his Temple in a *totally incomparable way*. God's Son, brought by the Spirit to the virgin's womb, will make his home in her, and the young woman's entire existence will serve his growth into a complete man.

As with the first reading's story of David, God's work does not *begin* with the moment in the story which we read in church, with the annunciation. Rather it begins *far back* with the first moment of Mary's existence. With her Immaculate Conception God begins his work on his Incomparable Temple. Only because he fills her with grace is she capable of saying an unconditional Yes to him, so that he become present in her womb. And God assures her (as he assured David) that his house, in her Son, will last, forever. "*He will rule over the house of Jacob and his reign will be without end.*" Mary's son is far more than David's son: "*Something greater than Solomon is here*" (Mt 12:42); *David himself calls him Lord* (Mt 22.45).

However, even though Jesus will go much further and construct the *ultimate temple* of God "out of living stones", as St Peter says (1 Pet 2:5), based on himself the "chief cornerstone", he never forgets that he owes his very existence to the holy house of his mother just as much as he had descent of the house of David through Joseph. Her motherhood is so imperishable that, from the cross, he named her Mother of his Church. The Church certainly originates in his flesh and blood, but that "Mystical Body", just like Jesus' own body, has the same Mother – she to whom the Lord of the Church himself owes his own existence.

And to the members of his Body, who share in Mary's fruitfulness he gives a share motherhood (Methodius, *The Banquet*, III.8: 'in each one Christ is spiritually born. And, therefore, the Church swells and travails in birth until Christ is formed in us (Gal 4.19), so that each of the saints, by partaking of Christ, has been born a Christ.')

3

So, friends, the annunciation points us to the Temple of Mary's body and the even greater Temple of Jesus's body which came into existence because of God's grace and Mary's faith. The second reading from St Paul to the Romans tells us that God's Temple – the one he makes out of human lives united to his Son's life – will be complete *only* when "all the Gentiles have been brought to the obedience of faith".

That's how the letter to the Romans ends. The Christians who already believe—that is, dear friends, you and me—are God's construction workers in the last phase of his building. We're not meant to be shut up in our life and worship; instead we remain open to God's plan, so as to make known to the world "the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed" by God (Rom 16.25).

God's plan is to make *all* humanity into a single Temple, as he promised to King David, and to the Blessed Virgin Mary: a single Temple fit for God himself to dwell in. God has always been building in human lives.

In Mary that one human life—Jesus—was brought into the world. He will bring God's *whole* purpose to fulfilment when, as the Church has been praying all through Advent, "Christ has put all his enemies under his feet" and "after he has destroyed every (other) authority and power, he will hand over the Kingdom to God the Father." (1 Cor 15.25) Only then will God be all in all.

Thank you for listening. I hope that when you hear these readings in the Eucharist, these thoughts may take you deeper into the riches of what God has revealed of himself to us. God bless you.