

## Solemnity of the Annunciation

[*Isaiah 7: 10-14, 8:10d; Psalm 40; Hebrews 10:4-10; Luke 1:26-38*]

Over the last few days I have noticed a mounting frustration manifest among our political leaders and medical guides. And for good reason. For a while now we have been told very clearly what measures we need to take in order not to come down with the COVID-19 virus and not to spread it. Self-isolation and social distancing are key elements of our communal preventative measures. These have been emphasized time and again in announcements and updates, yet there are still occurring imprudent assemblies of people, and the recommended distances among some persons are being ignored. Leaders are frustrated that warnings go unheeded and lives are put at risk in consequence.

It occurs to me that God could justifiably have the same complaint, not in respect of COVID-19 but regarding a virus that spreads even more quickly than this coronavirus and is even more lethal. Of course, I am speaking of the disease of sin. It attacks not the respiratory system but the soul, and thus wreaks havoc that is not only temporal but also eternal. It brings about a distancing that separates us in a deeply unhealthy way, causing a breach in our relationship with God and thus with one another. God sees clearly just how damaging this is, and so throughout history has given directives to stay well – we call those the commandments – and issued warnings, through the spokespersons we call the prophets, of what would happen were we not to obey. Yet, in spite of the clear admonitions, humanity continued to do as it had always done and did not heed the warnings.

As the frustration and alarm mounts among our leaders, we hear them promise that more stringent measures will need to be taken. There is talk of enforcement through fines and other penalties. And, of course, they themselves must maintain safe distance from the people as they speak to us. Here, though, is where similarity to God's response ends. Sin already contains within itself its own punishment – estrangement from God. So, God, out of his immense love, responds with the promise of mercy; He chooses not to maintain a distance but to draw near.

This is what we celebrate on this Solemnity of the Annunciation. Gabriel announces to Mary that God has decreed to come to his people by sending to the world his Son, who would save humanity from its disobedience, from its sinfulness. God does not maintain a distance; he enters history. Yet God also announces that this plan of God will mysteriously hinge on the response that Mary gives to God's role for her. The decrees of God seek a soul that is not resistant to directives, that does not choose to follow its own desires, but is ready to lay aside its own will for the sake of others. God's saving will meets that perfectly humble, docile and obedient response in the heart of Mary. "Be it done unto me according to your word." When Mary gave her *fiat*, in perfect faith, the Eternal Word of God, the Son of God, took flesh within her, to be born months later as Jesus of Nazareth, the Saviour of the world.

In these days, we must give close attention to COVID-19 and follow the directives of our leaders. If we are not following them, then it is obviously time to shape up and take it seriously. At the same time, let's be careful not to allow all this necessary attention upon the virus to make us forget that we are still in Lent, that holy season when we all need to shape up spiritually. How do we remain disobedient to the directives of God? In what ways do we still prioritize our desires

over the will of God and the needs of others? We must not let that insidious virus we call sin get the upper hand. Rather we need to get ahead of that, too, and flatten *its* curve by heartfelt repentance and amendment of life.

Let's turn to Mary to help us. She is our mother, after all, and always comes running whenever her children need her. We do need her maternal help and protection now in this time of pandemic crisis. And we need her help, too, whenever the disease of sin overtakes us. As we honour today her *fiat*, may she help us to give our own, with trusting faith, to our God who loves us and wills only our good.

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