

ST. LUKE Ch. 1, v. 38.

St. Luke 1, 26-38.  
Advent 4 B (Saint Charles. 18.12.2011).

“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord”.

For three weeks of Advent we have looked at different sections of the Mass, seizing the opportunity of the new English translation to improve our understanding of what we say and do. I actually think you are doing a great job of learning the new responses, but be warned that next weekend, at Christmas, things will be messy as we are joined by a lot of people who are not even aware that changes have been made! Now, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, I want to speak about the last part of the Mass - or I should really say the last two parts, because there is the Communion Rite and then the Concluding Rites.

During much of the thousand year history of the Latin Mass many people did not go to communion. Partly they felt unworthy, partly they were happy just to be in church to pray, and partly the priests began to consider it a nuisance to have people lining up for communion. It's still true that sometimes our awareness of sin will keep us from receiving, but that should not be normal. The Church describes regular communion as “the more perfect form of participation” in the Mass, and prefers that communion should be in both kinds when possible. Remember, though, that the Communion Rite begins immediately the Eucharistic Prayer has ended. As I said last week, that prayer is the celebration and commemoration of the Cross and Resurrection in such a profound way that they become present; and the power of that prayer means we can experience communion in a number of ways. First, the offering of the living sacrifice of Jesus Christ has brought us into communion with God the Father and so “we dare to say” the Lord's own prayer, the Our Father. Second, the sacrifice of the Mass makes it possible for us to exchange the sign of peace. When I was a child I thought the sign of peace was a gesture to show that I would be nicer to my brother and sister and try to respect my parents, and then God would forgive me. But I'd got it the wrong way around. Through the Mass God has already forgiven us; and in the light of his mercy our little quarrels are trivial. Jesus gives us peace, just as the priest declares: “The peace of the Lord be with you always”; and because of what He has done for us, because He has made peace for us, we can give each other the sign of peace, Christ's peace. As the Missal explains: “All offer one another a sign that expresses peace, communion, and charity”. And finally, at peace with God our Father and with those around us, we are ready for communion in the deepest and holiest sense.

I wonder if you have noticed that there is a slight shift in the Mass at this point. Up to now all our prayers have been addressed to God the Father through Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Now for just a moment we speak directly to Jesus and ask Him to make us ready to receive his life within us. “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us”. “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed”. We cannot really prepare ourselves for communion; that happens through the mercy and word of Jesus. The Missal describes our coming to communion as a procession - another expression of our unity - but while you are waiting to come out of the pew it makes most sense to sit or kneel quietly in prayer. And then, just before the moment of receiving, we should make some sign of reverence to the presence of Jesus, usually a bow of the head; and we reaffirm our recognition of the presence when we say “Amen” to the priest or minister. This is the Body of Christ.

Communion is the completion of the Mass in the sense that it is the high point of our personal communion with Jesus Christ and with all who share Christ’s Body and Blood with us. But it is not the end of the Mass. First, a prayer after communion reminds us that the Mass is an anticipation of heaven, and heaven is where our journey should end. For example, we have prayed to God several times in this Advent season “that, through our partaking in this mystery, you may teach us to judge wisely the things of earth and hold firm to the things of heaven”. But in the meantime we live here on earth and as Christians we have a responsibility to bring to earth the Kingdom of God. So after the blessing we are dismissed. We go in peace because we are strengthened by communion but we are also challenged to use the graces we have received on this first day of the week; we are given a mission. Pope Benedict has added two new dismissals for the end of the Mass: “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” and “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life”. And our last words are always “Thanks be to God”.

In the Gospel today we saw Mary saying “Yes” to the plan of God. In each Mass we, too, are overshadowed by the power of the Most High and asked to become God’s partners in the work of salvation. Behold, we too are the servants of the Lord. May it be done to us according to his word.