



SIEBENQUELL

Deserts die at the oasis: Resisting resignation

Daring Encounter



SOURCE: R. MONNERJAHN 2007, MARIA WEISSENSTEIN

In the past two weeks I have spoken of the dynamics of preparation and invitation in an Advent spirituality that seeks the oases of God and counters resignation. Yet, such a cycle is incomplete until we speak of a final dynamic of Advent, namely encounter.

The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth can teach us a great deal about encounter in general. To start with, it is obvious in the meeting of these two extraordinary women of faith that encounter is not a static moment. It does not happen once and for all. Encounter requires deepening. It is a process that demands growth. When people first encounter each other, they do not have automatic friendship that is in place from the start. Only the seed of friendship exists and then there is growth into the fullness of encounter, which we call friendship.

Mary is an excellent guide for wandering through deserts and knows one of the oases we need to seek is the oasis of encounter. And the image employed by Luke in this Sunday's Gospel is to dare the encounter of becoming pregnant with Christ. It is the very calling of Advent to go through the process of giving birth to Christ. Like Mary, we need to be impregnated by the Holy Spirit, live through the period of gestation and then become Christ bearers.

Mary is impregnated by the Holy Spirit. The same should be true of us, but being pregnant is always an intense encounter with another, who is still in the process of becoming. The Spirit of God plants the seed of new life within us. Our barrenness of heart and spirit gives way to an unexpected, gradual, enfolding fruitfulness. This impregnation of the Spirit occurs in our moments of conversion, the hours in which we experience a turning from sin and a turning towards God. We knew emptiness and choose evolving fullness.

Like any pregnant mother, we too need to work our way through the period of gestation. This is the time in which we nourish the new life growing within us as it grows, develops and changes. As Christ's life grows within us we feel a new peace, patience, joy, kindness and gentleness building up within us. We timidly start to pray, to serve others, to move from egocentricity to concern for others. Moral and ethical choices are made. Before we know it, we find this new life in Christ growing within us. If we ignore it or refuse to nourish it, it will die.

Finally we become the people who are the Christbearers to the world. The world first encounters Christ through us. But it is not the full grown Christ that they see. Instead they see the Christ we are struggling to bring into the world, the Christ whom we carry in immaturity within us. This is not the time for spectacular conversions. Instead, it is the small, almost imperceptible changes taking place within us that will cause people to sit up and notice. The slow growth of Christ in us is the springboard for conversion. Gradually the world will note the change in us, the different way in which we hold ourselves and recognize the precious we carry within us, a gift that is still growing and maturing.

There is no place where the desert dies at the oasis faster than when we dare encounter. Never underestimate the courage it takes to dare an encounter. This is not the same as the feeble and emaciated world of modern social communication. Encounter is not the world of cell phones, text messages, WhatsApp and Facebook. These are, indeed, the modern ways we communicate, but they are also the way in which we avoid the real cost and risk of encounter. These ways of communication mean we can pick and choose when it is convenient to us to share, a thing that is impossible in authentic encounter. It allows us to say what we want, without seeing and feeling the reactions our words evoke, which is impossible in real encounter. And we can turn them on and off at will, which is never permissible in genuine encounter. Encounter is an oasis of God in the midst of the desert sojourn, but it is not for cowards.

Encounter demands initiative, not avoidance. If we dare encounter, we have to show up, like Mary, who bridges no delay in going to Elizabeth. »Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah.« There is no keeping quiet about our experience of Christ, no keeping it to ourselves. There is a burning desire to share the gift received and the news he has heard. Pregnant mothers usually want to share the news. Mostly they come glowing with excitement, enthusiastic, joyous and bursting to tell the news. When they don't, we all know something is deeply wrong, because life is growing, but it is not welcomed with joy.

Our encounter, like Mary's, is a call to witness. When we are pregnant with Christ's life we speak a clear message to the world. »You who want to make and do everything, you cannot make your salvation, you cannot make God. He will give himself to you. Open your hands, open your hearts, receive your God. He is more than you can ever create for yourselves. Nothing in human fruitfulness can create him. We have only the Spirit to thank for this fullness of life.«

Encounter creates change, growth and new life. Mary is filled with life in her encounter with Christ. This life animates and motivates her. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit after encountering Mary, the Christbearer. Suddenly she praises God. The child within her comes to life and leaps in her womb. Thus it also shall be with the people who we encounter as Christbearers. They will be filled with the Holy Spirit. Within them the child, the human ability to recognize truth and love, will leap and their hearts will be gladdened.

There is a beautiful German hymn that is not often heard in my home. It is called »Maria durch ein Dornwald ging« (Mary walked through a forest of thorns.) The song recounts a legend of Mary passing through a forest of thorns while heavy with the Christ child. For seven years the forest had borne no foliage. However, as Mary passes through with the child under her heart the thorns begin to blossom with roses.

That song holds particular fascination for me. It is a song of prophecy. As Christbearers we will have to carry Christ's budding into our world and society that I have described as a desert, but which the song depicts as a forest of thorns. We know a world that is thorny, embittered and barren. With Christ under our hearts those thorns could blossom into roses. And a rose in the midst of a forest of thorns is an oasis.

Encounter is process. I have mentioned impregnation, gestation and bearing the child. Naturally all of this lead to the final stage of actually giving birth, of bringing the mature Christ into the world, in the flesh. Yet, this we cannot speak of in this hour. This is the mystery we will celebrate in the Holy Night. Be patient. Be expectant. Be joyous. The time is very near. And so is my last homily.

Erik Riechers SAC

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