

Icons of Gentleness

Homily for December 12th 2022

On December 12th 1531 a Mexican Mestizo peasant named Juan Diego acted upon a request from the Blessed Virgin Mary who had at first appeared to him on December 9th 1531. He was to gather up roses (which by the way do not bloom in December) that were on Tepeyac Hill, where the apparition occurred and take them to the Bishop as evidence our Lady's request that a shrine be built on that site was genuine. Upon gaining an audience with the Bishop, St Juan Diego unfolded his tilma and miraculously the Image of our Lady of Guadalupe was on the cactus fibre garment.

I want to suggest to you today, that this image is the most remarkable icon in the world because it was drawn by our Lady and since 1531 it has been viewed by millions of people.

Yesterday was Gaudete Sunday, the Latin word for "rejoice". The theme is taken from these words in Philippians 4:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Joy is associated with a quality described here as "gentleness". I would like to suggest that the image of our Lady captures this quality of gentleness and that on this Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe are invited to be living icons of gentleness. What is an icon? We know this word as it relates to all those images on our desk top allowing us to access programmes on our computers. However, the word icon is also used to describe depictions of Jesus, Mary and the Saints. They are artistic invitations that beckon us to draw close to the Company of Heaven.

Let's think about the association between the adjective "gentleness" and "icon". If a computer icon allows us to access the complex systems contained on its hardware, and a religious icon allows us to draw close to God through beautiful images; when displaying gentleness, we are living images, icons, allowing people to access the grace and presence of the Lord through us.

As we choose to be living images of God through exhibiting gentleness, we will know joy because the Lord is near.

Now with this in mind, listen again to our text from Zechariah:

¹⁰ Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For lo, I will come and dwell in your midst, says the LORD. ¹¹ Many nations shall join themselves to the LORD on that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you.

¹² The LORD will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem.¹

Notice this passage is celebrating the day when the Lord will visit daughter Zion and as a consequence Zion, Jerusalem is to sing and rejoice because God is coming to dwell in her midst. Twice this theme of God's visitation is mentioned and Jerusalem will be chosen as God's dwelling place.

Within Catholic teaching this phrase "daughter of Zion" often is used to represent Mary and the exhortation to "rejoice" sometimes translated "Hail" is echoed by the Angel Gabriel in his words to Mary, and in Elizabeth's greeting "Blessed are you among woman". Within the tradition, although it is not stated explicitly, Luke may be alluding to Zechariah's prophecy in the stories of the Angel's visitation and Mary's visitation to Elizabeth.

This theme of visitation allows us to understand what it means to think of this Feast Day when our Lady appeared to Juan Diego and her Icon was then miraculously imposed upon the Tilma as a representation of gentleness and love.

How appropriate it is today, to therefore think of the gift of Pope Francis' visit on this National Day of Prayer in Solidarity with Indigenous People. He came among us as an icon of gentleness. What Mary's apparition and his pilgrimage affirms is how important it is for us to know that all peoples in Canada are to know we are joined one to another within the circle of the gentleness of the Lord's great love. At the Mass in Edmonton, celebrating the feast day of Saints Anne and Joachim, the Holy Father recognized the gift of this circle of love when he said:

"No one comes into this life detached from others. The love that awaited us and welcomed us into this world are part of a unique history that preceded us... we did not choose that history; we received it as a gift."

How clearly this is expressed in today's Gospel in the visit of Mary to Elizabeth. And how by coming amongst us last summer Pope Francis wanted to affirm that the Lord is near in the midst of the sorrow and suffering that have resulted for the First Peoples' because of the often times traumatic effects of the Residential School System.

During his visit to Iqaluit, the last stop before his return to Rome, Pope Francis shared the words of an Elder who spoke of the beautiful spirit that reigned in Indigenous families before the advent of the Indian Residential School system. He compared those days of grandparents, parents and children living harmoniously together as to springtime when the birds chirp happily around their mother. But then the singing stopped, families were broken up. Winter fell over everything.

In reflecting on this image, the Canadian Council of Bishops stated:

As we grow in our knowledge of one another and move away from stereotypes toward an increased understanding of our unique and shared beliefs and values, may our journey of reconciliation bring the springtime back once again and may our winter of shame be banished forever.

¹ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#) (Zec 2:10–12). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

Today's Feast affirms in a special way Mary's love and nearness to the First Peoples'. At St Peter's we want to continue to work and pray intentionally for further healing and understanding so that we can be icons of gentleness in the journey towards wholeness.

How graced we were in this regard to host Breakfast with the Bishop in late November where there were tears, laughter, music, good food and conversation that allowed us to know the Lord in near as we gathered with First Peoples of Southern Alberta and our chief shepherd, Bishop McGrattan.

Our Lady of Guadalupe, pray for us, that we may indeed know that the Lord is near and rejoice in learning what it is to be icons and gentleness and healing with Canada's First Peoples.