

December 20, 2020 Mother Pollard and Dr. King Homily: Sometime in 1956 Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. participated in an organized protest at a bus stop in Montgomery, Alabama. There he encountered a veteran of the civil rights movement, an elderly, uneducated and impoverished African American whom he affectionately called “Mother Pollard”. She possessed a deep understanding of the meaning of the moment and was a woman of robust faith. She was also, for the great civil rights leader, a heaven sent messenger. Let Doctor King tell the story:

“On a particular Monday evening following a tension-packed week which included being arrested and receiving numerous threatening telephone calls, I spoke at a mass meeting. I attempted to convey an overt impression of strength and courage although I was inwardly depressed and fear-stricken. At the end of the meeting, Mother Pollard came to the front of the church and said, ‘Come here, son’. I immediately went to her and hugged her affectionately. ‘Something is wrong with you’, she said. ‘You didn’t talk strong tonight.’ Seeking further to disguise my fears, I retorted, ‘Oh no, Mother Pollard, nothing is wrong. I am feeling as fine as ever.’ But her insight was discerning. ‘Now you can’t fool me,’ she said. ‘I know something is wrong. Is it that we ain’t doing things to please you? Or is it that the white folks is bothering you?’ Before I could respond, she looked directly into my eyes and said, ‘I don’t told you that we is with you all the way.’ Then her face became radiant and she said in words of quiet certainty, ‘But even if we ain’t with you, God’s gonna take care of you’”.

Her message was loud and clear. It was a defining moment in King’s life and a much needed boost in his struggle for civil rights.

Today’s gospel is the all too familiar account of the Annunciation, one of the joyful mysteries of the rosary. The expression “The Lord is with you” is mentioned in the gospel (Lk. 1: 27) and also in the first reading from the Second book of Samuel, “Nathan answered the king, ‘go, do whatever you have in mind, for the Lord is with you’”. (2 Sam. 7:4) This phrase usually signals that someone was called upon to play a pivotal role in God’s plan for salvation, and that great personal sacrifices would be required of him. He would not have to face the many challenges alone. God’s presence and protection would be with him throughout the course of his mission.

The words of the heavenly messenger, “fear not” and “the Lord is with you” apply to each one of us. We are in its grip. The pandemic of the virus, the civil unrest in many of our large cities, the rising unemployment rates, and the lamentable rise in mental illness have paralyzed too many of us. But we have no reason to fear because Christ has come to be with us. He is Emmanuel, “God with us”, to guide and protect us. It is interesting to note that the words “fear not” occur forty-four times in Sacred Scripture.

Even more troubling is that the Western world has largely rejected the religious beliefs of Christians. Today’s gospel would be considered utter nonsense. A virgin mother? A woman conceiving a child in old age? A Divine Messiah? Such doctrine is ridiculed by the skeptics. The supernatural is dismissed as pre-scientific superstition. Yet we are surrounded by mysteries of nature, such as “gravity”, “time”, “matter” and “light”. Why can we not accept the supernatural mystery of Grace?

In the Book of Genesis when Sarah, the wife of Abraham, doubts the Lord's promise, she hears the words, "Is there anything too marvelous for the Lord to do?" (Gen. 18:14) In today's gospel, after expressing her doubts, given she had no carnal relations with a man, Mary heard words of great wisdom: "Nothing will be impossible for God". (Lk. 1:37) She responded with words that have been immortalized in the history of the faith: "Be it done to me according to your word".

At the end of one of his sermons, Martin Luther King spoke of a time when the words of a motto were found in the homes of devout Christians:

"Fear knocked at the door.

Faith answered.

There was no one there."

Do not be afraid, my brothers and sisters, for you have found favor with God!

Amen!