

EDITOR'S PREFACE

The words, “Rejoice, because God is with you; he is with us,” are words that truly open a new epoch. Dear friends, with an act of faith we must once again accept and understand in the depths of our hearts this liberating word: “Rejoice!”

—Pope Benedict XVI

As Pope Benedict XVI notes in the first meditation in this collection, knowing that there is a God who is good, who knows us, who is so near to us, is truly the gospel—the good news that brings us joy.

And the Holy Father is the bearer of good news in these fifty-five reflections on passages from the gospels. Taken from his homilies and Angelus messages over the past three years, the meditations here reveal the pope’s passionate love for Christ, his depth of faith, his grasp of Scripture, and his perspective on the challenges facing us as Christians in the world today. Pope Benedict is a brilliant theologian and scholar, but first and foremost he is a pastor, and this is evident in every meditation in this collection. A strong advocate of *lectio divina*, the prayerful reading of the Scriptures, he shows us how much nourishment and inspiration we can derive from meditating on the word of God.

The Joy of Knowing Christ

The Word Among Us Press is delighted to bring you these reflections. We hope that as you meditate on the gospels with Pope Benedict, you will experience the great joy of which he speaks—that of knowing Christ and his overflowing love for you, his beloved son or daughter.

I. INTRODUCTION: READING SCRIPTURE IN THE SPIRIT

On November 18, 1965, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council approved the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. This document is one of the pillars on which the entire council is built. It addresses Revelation and its transmission, the inspiration and interpretation of sacred Scripture and its fundamental importance in the life of the Church.

Gathering the fruits of the theological renewal that preceded it, Vatican II put Christ at the center, presenting him as “both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation” (*Dei Verbum*, 2). Indeed, the Lord Jesus, the Word made flesh who died and rose, brought to completion the work of salvation, consisting of deeds and words, and fully manifested the face and will of God so that no new public revelation is to be expected until his glorious return (see DV, 3).

The apostles and their successors, the bishops, are depositories of the message that Christ entrusted to his Church so that it might be passed on in its integrity to all generations. Sacred Scripture of the Old and New Testaments and sacred Tradition contain this message, whose understanding develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit.

This same Tradition makes known the integral canon of the sacred books. It makes them directly understandable and operative so that God, who has spoken to the patriarchs and prophets, does not cease to speak to the Church and, through her, to the world (see DV, 8).

The Church does not live for herself but for the gospel, and it is always in the gospel that she finds the direction for her journey.

The conciliar constitution *Dei Verbum* emphasized appreciation for the Word of God, which developed into a profound renewal for the life of the ecclesial community, especially in preaching, catechesis, theology, spirituality, and ecumenical relations. Indeed, it is the Word of God which guides believers, through the action of the Holy Spirit, toward all truth (see John 16:13).

Among the many fruits of this biblical springtime I would like to mention the spread of the ancient practice of *lectio divina* or “spiritual reading” of sacred Scripture. It consists in poring over a biblical text for some time, reading it and rereading it, as it were, “ruminating” on it as the Fathers say and squeezing from it, so to speak, all its “juice,” so that it may nourish meditation and contemplation and, like water, succeed in irrigating life itself.

One condition for *lectio divina* is that the mind and heart be illumined by the Holy Spirit, that is, by the same Spirit who

inspired the Scriptures, and that they be approached with an attitude of “reverential hearing.”

This attitude was typical of Mary Most Holy, as the icon of the annunciation symbolically portrays: the Virgin receives the heavenly messenger while she is intent on meditating upon the sacred Scriptures, usually shown by a book that Mary holds in her hand, on her lap or on a lectern.

This is also the image of the Church which the council itself offered in the constitution *Dei Verbum*: “Hearing the Word of God with reverence . . .” (1).

Let us pray that like Mary, the Church will be a humble handmaid of the divine Word and will always proclaim it with firm trust, so that “the whole world . . . through hearing it may believe, through belief . . . may hope, through hope . . . may come to love” (DV, 1).

—Angelus, November 6, 2005

2. SHARING MARY'S JOY

LUKE 1:26-28

Rejoice!”
Let us now meditate briefly on . . . one of the loveliest passages of sacred Scripture. And so as not to take too long, I would like to reflect on only three words from this rich gospel.

The first word on which I would like to meditate with you is the angel's greeting to Mary. In the Italian translation the angel says, “Hail, Mary.” But the Greek word *kaire* means in itself “be glad” or “rejoice.”

And here is the first surprising thing: the greeting among the Jews was “Shalom,” “Peace,” whereas the greeting of the Greek world was *Kaire*, “Be glad.” It is surprising that the angel, on entering Mary's house, should have greeted her with the greeting of the Greeks: *Kaire*, “Be glad, rejoice.” And when, forty years later, the Greeks had read this gospel, they were able to see an important message in it: they realized that the beginning of the New Testament, to which this passage from Luke referred, was bringing openness to the world of peoples and to the universality of the People of God, which by then included not only the Jewish people but also the world in its totality, all peoples.

The new universality of the kingdom of the true son of David appears in this Greek greeting of the angel.

However, it is appropriate to point out straightaway that the angel's words took up a prophetic promise that is found in the book of the prophet Zephaniah. We find the same greeting almost literally. Inspired by God, the prophet Zephaniah says to Israel, "Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! . . . the LORD [is with you and] is in your midst." We know that Mary was very familiar with the sacred Scriptures. Her Magnificat is a fabric woven of threads from the Old Testament. We may thus be certain that the Blessed Virgin understood straightaway that these were the words of the prophet Zephaniah addressed to Israel, to the "daughter Zion," considered as a dwelling place of God. And now the surprising thing, which must have given Mary food for thought, is that these words, addressed to all Israel, were being specifically addressed to her, Mary. And thus, it must clearly have appeared to her that she herself was the "daughter Zion" of whom the prophet spoke, and that the Lord, therefore, had a special intention for her, that she was called to be the true dwelling place of God, a dwelling place not built of stones but of living flesh, of a living heart, that God was really intending to take her, the Virgin, as his own true temple. What an intention! And as a result, we can understand that Mary began to think with special intensity about what this greeting meant.

However, let us now reflect in particular on the first word: “Rejoice, be glad.” This is the first word that resounds in the New Testament as such, because the angel’s announcement to Zechariah of the birth of John the Baptist is the word that still rings out on the threshold between the two Testaments. It is only with this dialogue which the angel Gabriel has with Mary that the New Testament really begins. We can therefore say that the first word of the New Testament is an invitation to joy: “Rejoice, be glad!” The New Testament is truly “gospel,” the “good news” that brings us joy. God is not remote from us, unknown, enigmatic or perhaps dangerous. God is close to us, so close that he makes himself a child, and we can informally address this God.

It was the Greek world above all that grasped this innovation, that felt this joy deeply, for it had been unclear to the Greeks whether there was a good God, a wicked God, or simply no God. Religion at that time spoke to them of so many divinities: therefore, they had felt they were surrounded by very different divinities that were opposed to one another; thus, they were afraid that if they did something for one of these divinities, another might be offended and seek revenge.

So it was that they lived in a world of fear, surrounded by dangerous demons, never knowing how to save themselves from these forces in conflict with one another. It was a world of fear, a

dark world. Then they heard: “Rejoice, these demons are nothing; the true God exists and this true God is good, he loves us, he knows us, he is with us, with us even to the point that he took on flesh!”

This is the great joy that Christianity proclaims. Knowing this God is truly “good news,” a word of redemption.

Perhaps we Catholics who have always known it are no longer surprised and no longer feel this liberating joy keenly. However, if we look at today’s world where God is absent, we cannot but note that it is also dominated by fears and uncertainties: Is it good to be a person or not? Is it good to be alive or not? Is it truly a good to exist? Or might everything be negative? And they really live in a dark world; they need anesthetics to be able to live. Thus, the words, “Rejoice, because God is with you, he is with us,” are words that truly open a new epoch.

Dear friends, with an act of faith we must once again accept and understand in the depths of our hearts this liberating word: “Rejoice!” We cannot keep solely for ourselves this joy that we have received; joy must always be shared. Joy must be communicated. Mary went without delay to communicate her joy to her cousin Elizabeth. And ever since her assumption into heaven, she has showered joy upon the whole world; she has become the great Consoler: our Mother who communicates joy, trust, and kindness and also invites us to spread joy. This is the

Meditations on the Gospels

real commitment of Advent: to bring joy to others. Joy is the true gift of Christmas, not expensive presents that demand time and money.

We can transmit this joy simply: with a smile, with a kind gesture, with some small help, with forgiveness. Let us give this joy, and the joy given will be returned to us. Let us seek in particular to communicate the deepest joy, that of knowing God in Christ. Let us pray that this presence of God's liberating joy will shine out in our lives.

—Homily, December 18, 2005