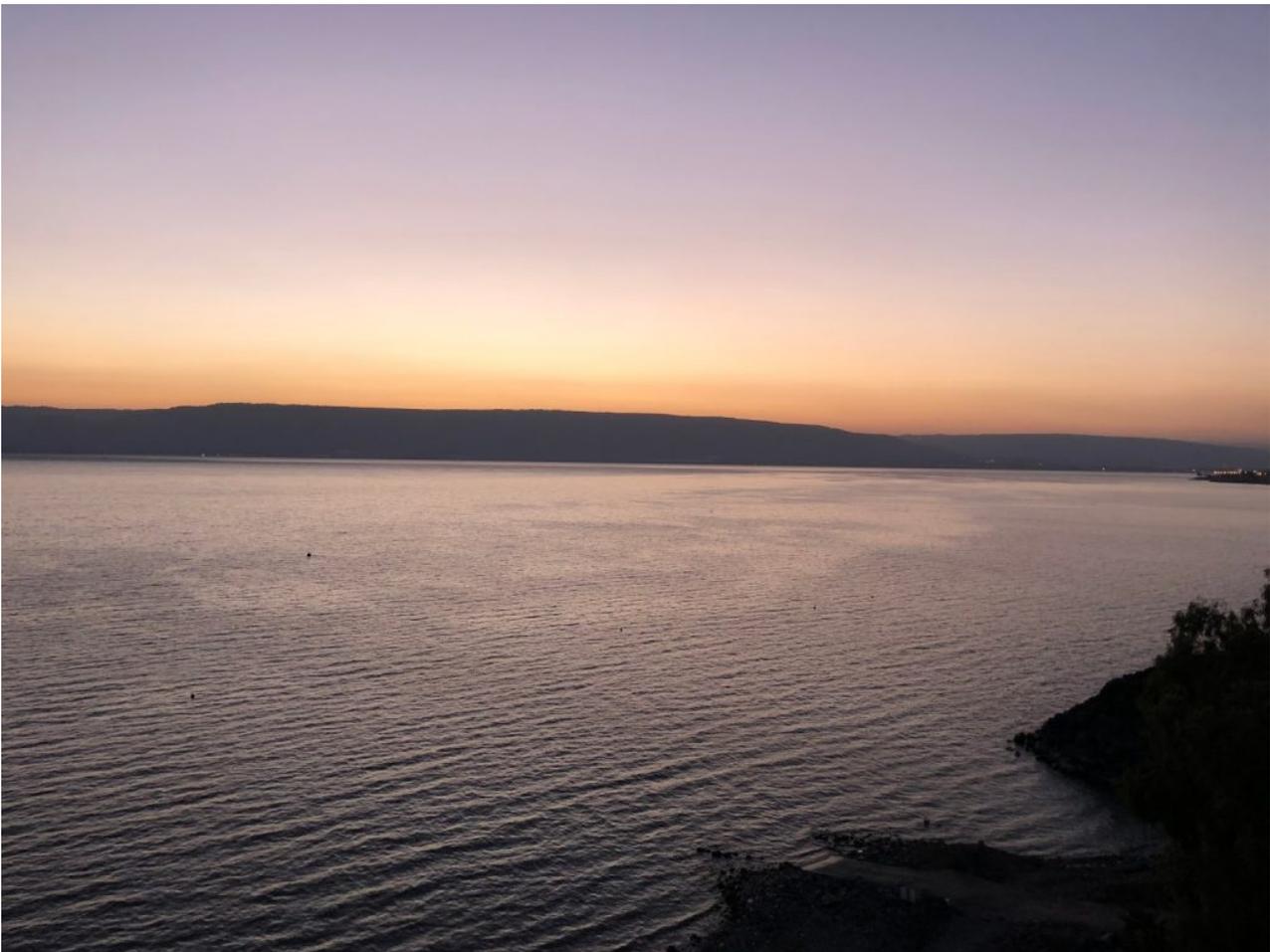


Archbishop Smith: The Dawn from On High

These were the words that came to me as I gazed out upon the Sea of Galilee this morning at sunrise. The words come from the song of Zechariah, proclaimed at the naming of his son, John the Baptist. He recognized that God was fulfilling all of his promises to come and set the world free from slavery to sin, and knew from the depths of his heart that soon, very soon, the “dawn from on high” would break upon the world in the child to be born of Mary to dispel the darkness of sin and shadows of sadness enveloping the people (cf. *Luke 1:68-79*).



Sea of Galilee

As Zechariah realized, the role of Mary is pivotal in the accomplishment of this saving plan of God. She was our particular focus today as we set out from Tiberias to Nazareth, the place of the Annunciation, and the locale where Jesus grew up under her watchful eye and with the protection afforded him by St. Joseph.



Façade of the Basilica of the Annunciation

Upon arrival in Nazareth we went directly to the stunning Basilica of the Annunciation. Here we encountered the particular word that, every time we make this pilgrimage, becomes the very heart of the adventure: *hic*. Latin for "here", it is inscribed upon a plaque fixed to an altar erected in a first-century grotto held by tradition to be the home of Mary, where she received the announcement from the angel Gabriel. The inscription reads: *Verbum caro hic factum est* (the Word was made flesh here). In this small locale, Mary gave her "yes", which set everything in motion. My mind goes to the famous sermon of St. Bernard of Clairvaux:

You have heard, O Virgin, that you will conceive and bear a son; you have heard that it will not be by man but by the Holy Spirit. The angel awaits an answer; it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for your word of compassion; the sentence of condemnation weighs heavily upon us.

The price of our salvation is offered to you. We shall be set free at once if you consent. In the eternal Word of God we all came to be, and behold, we die. In your brief response we are to be remade in order to be recalled to life.

Tearful Adam with his sorrowing family begs this of you, O loving Virgin, in their exile from Paradise. Abraham begs it, David begs it. All the other holy patriarchs, your ancestors, ask it of you, as they dwell in the country of the shadow of death. This is what the whole earth waits for, prostrate at your feet. It is right in doing so, for on your word depends comfort for the wretched, ransom for the captive, freedom for the condemned, indeed, salvation for all the sons of Adam, the whole of your race.

Answer quickly, O Virgin. Reply in haste to the angel, or rather through the angel to the Lord. Answer with a word, receive the Word of God. Speak your own word, conceive the divine Word. Breathe a passing word, embrace the eternal Word.

Why do you delay, why are you afraid? Believe, give praise, and receive. Let humility be bold, let modesty be confident. This is no time for virginal simplicity to forget prudence. In this matter alone, O prudent Virgin, do not fear to be presumptuous. Though modest silence is pleasing, dutiful speech is now more necessary. Open your heart to faith, O blessed Virgin, your lips to praise, your womb to the Creator. See, the desired of all nations is at your door, knocking to enter. If he should pass by because of your delay, in sorrow you would begin to seek him afresh, the One whom your soul loves. Arise, hasten, open. Arise in faith, hasten in devotion, open in praise and thanksgiving. Behold the handmaid of the Lord, she says, be it done to me according to your word. (Hom. 4, 8-9: Opera omnia, Edit. Cisterc. 4 [1966], 53-54)

Through the fiat of Mary, God became man, the Word became flesh, and the world received the gift of the Saviour. And it happened "here", right where we find ourselves. Hard to take in.



Then our attention shifted to another one called to give a “yes” that was decisive not only for his life but also for ours: St. Joseph.

While waiting to celebrate mass at the Basilica, we visited the adjacent Church of St. Joseph, built over what tradition identifies as his workshop. Then, following a tour of the Mary of Nazareth International Centre and a viewing there of a moving multi-media presentation, we made our way to the convent of the Sisters of Nazareth.

Beneath this religious house are excavations that have brought to light evidence of earlier Crusader and Byzantine church construction, below which is what is most likely the home of St. Joseph where he lived with Mary and Jesus. Particularly stunning is a first century tomb, complete with a stone rolled away, and spoken of locally for many years as “the tomb of the just man”, i.e., Joseph.

Moving for anyone to see this, of course, but it is especially so for us, whose Archdiocese has as its patron St. Joseph the Worker.



Chapel in the Convent of the Sisters of Nazareth

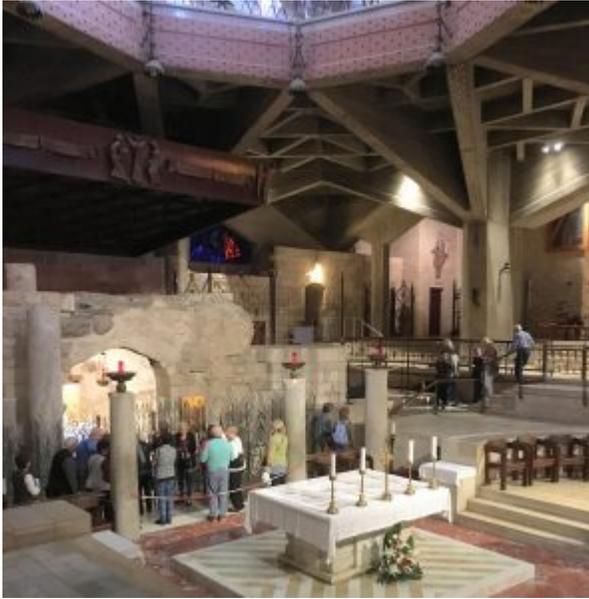
I'm beginning to see the tears flow. It happens in every pilgrimage, and there is no telling when or where it will happen. A word, a sight, a touch can bring about a flood of awareness of the reality of the love of God, and the heart is moved to its depths. But these are not just passing emotions. Nazareth teaches us that implicit within these encounters with the love of God is a call to give our own fiat, our own yes, and to do so *hic*, here, indeed, here and now.



“Yes” to what? Pondering the example of Mary and Joseph helps us understand what is happening to us here. Each was summoned by God to surrender to his plan and to His personal intervention in their lives. Theirs was a surrender to wonder and mystery. We need to highlight this.

The modern mindset will restrict the understanding of truth to what is visible and empirically verifiable, thus leaving no room for mystery and transcendence. Here we experience just how sadly limiting is such a worldview. What comes flooding in upon one as certain when we visit the holy sites is that God is real, that He has acted in history in particular persons and places, and that He continues to unfold the mystery of his saving plan in the particularities of the lives of each one of us. What floods us, in other words, is Truth.

\What the Gospel proclaims is felt and known deep within the heart as undeniably true. Small wonder that the tears flow! Pondering Mary and Joseph we realize that our call is to fully surrender our lives to Truth, which the Gospel reveals to be a person: Jesus of Nazareth.



One final thought, and this to my mind is another lesson from this holy place. Each time I visit here, I listen to the expert guides recall how, at the time of the Holy Family, Nazareth was a very small village, considered by many to be of no particular significance. Yet it was here that God entered history!

The lesson of Nazareth's obscurity is that nothing escapes God's notice; nothing in his eyes is insignificant.

I like to insist on such a lesson because I am meeting many people today, especially among the young, who fear that they do not measure up, who wonder if they count, because they often experience themselves as unnoticed, treated as lacking in any significance. Nazareth teaches how false that all is.

The truth is that each person counts, that everyone matters, and that, therefore, we need to be very careful not to measure ourselves by human standards but learn instead to embrace with joy and confidence the wondrous fact that we are each the beloved of God.

