

Sermon 23 December 2018

4th Sunday of Advent

**Micah 5: 2 – 5a Hebrews 10: 5 – 10; Luke 1: 39
– 45**

Are we ready like Mary?

I've rather enjoyed the way the church has been slowly decorated for Christmas this year. People have come in at different times to do different bits, rather than all at once on one day. So we're slowly getting ready for Christmas in church. Are you ready at home? Or nearly ready? It almost feels like an irrelevant question when so much of our planning feels provisional just now. I hope very much to see my family together over Christmas, but I'm trying to sit light to this. To admit the possibility that any one of us might test positive for Covid and have to self-isolate. I'm afraid to get too excited in case I'm disappointed again like last year.

But Christmas will come, whatever form our celebration takes. It will come with the invitation to welcome Jesus into our hearts

again. Not just as the baby in the manger, but as our Lord and our God. Are we ready, as Mary was when she had that extraordinary visit from the angel, to welcome Jesus this Christmas?

Our Gospel this morning gives us a brief account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth, who was to be the mother of John the Baptist. Elizabeth was much older than Mary, but they had a great deal in common. They were relatives, and they were both expecting babies. Both pregnancies were miraculous. Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were elderly; they had been married for a long time without having any children. Now Elizabeth was pregnant at last, and Zechariah had been told that his child would be great in the eyes of God. Mary had been told by the angel that she too was to bear a child. The power of the Holy Spirit would make this possible. Mary's visit to Elizabeth was not a short one – we're told Mary stayed about three months. There would have been a great deal to talk about, preparations to make – as there always are when new babies are expected.

God had been preparing for a long time. Much longer than Elizabeth or Mary. Our first reading takes us back some six or seven hundred years. The prophet Micah foretells that a great ruler will come from Bethlehem - an insignificant little town. The great King David did indeed come from Bethlehem. And so did Jesus. And our reading tells us that He will be great to the ends of the earth, and he will be a ruler of peace. You'll get this reading twice today if you come back for the Carol Service this evening!

Christmas is often a time when we too look back. One of the reasons why Christmas can be hard is that we remember family and friends who used to be part of our Christmas, but who are no longer with us.

But the thrust of Mary and Elizabeth's conversation is all about looking forwards. Zechariah has been struck dumb because he does not believe the angel's message that he will have a son. But Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, and cries out in prophecy when Mary arrives to see her. She can't hold it in.

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy." Mary, she says, is blessed because she simply believed that God would fulfil in her what had been said to her. She trusted in God's plan for the future, despite the obvious difficulties that it would cause her.

In our Advent course this year we've spent a session thinking about Mary. We began with these words to describe her: Young, virgin, mother, wife, thoughtful, serene, trusting, and blue – because she's almost always dressed in blue in pictures! After our discussion, we added these words: poet and prophet – thinking about her great song of praise, the Magnificat which we heard today. Also humble, blessed, strong and resolute. Much stronger words!

Here is what one 20th century spiritual writer says about Mary:

"The Blessed Virgin Mary stands for simple human nature as it ought to be – a pure capacity for God: full of grace because emptied of self:

and so she's the classical pattern of every human soul turned to Him, whether the special vocation of that soul is prayer or service – homely, quiet self-sacrifice or great initiative. What matters is simply our capacity for God and our self-oblivious response.”¹

In other words, Mary is an example to all of us as we watch and wait to celebrate the coming of Jesus at Christmas. Her capacity for God, full of grace and emptied of self, stands for ever as an example to all of us. Something for us to aim for.

Mary could not have imagined what would be the result of her saying ‘yes’ to God. But she trusted Him completely and got on with preparing for the birth of her child.

With all the uncertainties of this year, all of our hopes and fears this Christmas. Are we ready, like Mary, to trust God completely, to welcome Jesus into our hearts and lives?

Amen

Revd Diana Young

¹ Evelyn Underhill, quoted in *Music of Eternity* – Robin Wrigley-Carr, p44