

21.12.14 – Fourth Sunday in Advent

2 Samuel 7.1-11; Romans 16.25-end; Luke 1.26-38

*May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

I don't know if you have seen the Christmas Advert brought out by a group of churches to rival those of the big retail stores. It starts in a festive living room where a young couple are sitting with their newborn baby beside a Christmas tree, in front of a roaring fire. Gradually the room is stripped back and we are taken to the stable in Bethlehem. Before our eyes, the furniture is transformed into bales of hay and the Moses basket becomes a wooden manger.

It ends with a simple, yet profound slogan: "Christmas starts with the power of Love".

In her sermon last Sunday, Margaret spoke about the fact that, as Christians, we should be filled with joy. Joy, that we are loved by God and have been redeemed by him, through the coming of Christ whose birth we are preparing to celebrate.

The one who, since time began, was to be part of God's plan for the salvation of the world ... a plan prefigured in today's passage from the 2<sup>nd</sup> book of Samuel and announced in our Gospel reading from Luke.

It's such a familiar one isn't it ... I wonder what sort of image it conjures up for you of Mary, the mother of Jesus. A young woman sitting demurely, draped in blue, like many of our paintings and Christmas cards today?

The fact is that this passage, at face value, tells us very little about Mary. Luke describes her simply as a young woman who was betrothed to be married, whereas we read that Joseph is of the house of David. Even in the case of the previous story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Luke tells us that they are righteous and blameless, that they kept God's commandments and prayed to God. Yet, not a single word describes the virtues or character of Mary or explains why God might have chosen her. And perhaps that's the point. Throughout biblical history God again and again called – not the great and the good and the famous – but humble, ordinary people – to rescue, to guide, to prophecy, to teach and to herald his coming. Many of them, like Moses, for example, were reluctant and needed to be persuaded.

That was not so for Mary. It is here – demonstrated in this Gospel reading today – that we see the strength of her quiet faith and unwavering trust in God – especially when you realise the enormity of what she was being told.

In first century Palestine, where the punishment for adultery, though not often carried out, was death by stoning you would think that all sorts of fears & anxieties might have crowded into her

mind ... How will I tell Joseph? What will my parents say? What will the neighbours think? ..  
. and yet what came to Mary was perplexity – perhaps that she was being addressed in such  
exalted terms ... and puzzlement , maybe even a sense of wonder , “how can this be since I am a  
virgin?”

Interestingly, perhaps to win her trust – to show that, with God, *all* things *are* possible – the angel  
also gave her a sign ... that Elizabeth, her cousin, thought to be barren, and now well on in years,  
was expecting a son .... And yet, before she saw evidence of that, Mary responded, not with the  
questioning doubt of Zechariah (who said “How will I know ...?”), but with humble acceptance  
and trust. “ I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be to me according to your will” ... in other  
words, regardless of the circumstances, “your will be done!

Mary’s response is one of quiet submission. Handmaid means ‘slave-girl’; it expresses complete  
obedience. She recognised the will of God and accepted it.

And if we could read on, we would see Mary quickly getting ready and setting off with great haste  
to see Elisabeth. The Magnificat, which the choir sang today, is Mary’s song of praise when her  
cousin’s greeting confirmed **for her, and** for **us**, all that the angel had said.

It was a greeting that would have given her the strength she needed in all that she was to face as  
the mother of Christ. One that Mary would have treasured up in her heart, and drawn on again  
and again in times of difficulty.

As we look back in biblical history, we can see the chain of events, which runs like a golden  
thread to this moment in history ... with successive people, from generation to generation,  
accepting God’s call on their lives – not knowing where that would lead them – but trusting in  
his faithfulness.

In our scientific age, when people need to see things proven in black and white, it is perhaps  
unfashionable to believe in something like the virgin birth. And yet, if we believed in a god who  
could only do what was humanly possible, we need to ask ourselves, what kind of God would he  
be? Indeed, would he be God at all?

And if we believe in the resurrection of Jesus – which is the basis of our faith – and in the  
outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – which transformed those first disciples and  
generations of Christians down the centuries – is it so hard to believe that God, the creator of the  
world, is able to do abundantly above all we can ask or think?

Christmas starts with the power of love. It is through the power of God’s love for the world, that  
we – you and I – are worshipping him here today.

“For”, as the angel said, “ nothing is impossible with God.

When we accept God’s call on our lives, as Mary did, we become one more link, however small – and however flawed we may feel ourselves to be – in that great chain of salvation. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we become partners with God, bearing his love to the world.

As we approach Christmas, whatever is happening to us in life, let us rejoice that, by the grace of God, we are privileged to be part of it.