



4th Sunday in Advent

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 24 December 2023

READINGS

2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16; Psalm 89: 1-4, 9-17; Romans 16: 25-27; Luke 1: 26-38.

Where is God leading us?

We have arrived at Christmas Eve, and everything is probably ready for the great festivities tomorrow. Of course there is that small window open today for you to do or get those things you forgot, and if it comes to mind during the service, well, we probably won't notice a surreptitious note made on your phone, just as long as it is God who reminded you, and it will be done as an expression of love for those whom God has given you. It's probably been hectic, but we have reached the end and now the holiday can really begin.

At this point in the story, Joseph and Mary would have been on the road for quite a few days. Google maps says that to walk from Nazareth to Bethlehem take one day and 10 hours, shortest route. Well if that means 34 hours, then with luggage and probably a donkey and a heavily pregnant woman, that would probably mean four to five days, if not more, depending on where they stopped, the state of the roads, and the need to rest, both the humans and the animal. It must have been hard, and towards the end, perhaps early labour was beginning to show itself so there would have been fear in the mix too. In Bethlehem they were equally alone. There was obviously no family who would have hosted them – they were looking for accommodation in an INN. I wonder, if at that point, Mary wondered if it was all worth it.

We go back to today's gospel reading. The Angel Gabriel visits Mary and begins with "you who are highly favoured." Before turning Mary's life upside down, the angel assured her that "the Lord is with her." So this is a privilege, because God regards her very highly, and will be with her. The records that Mary was "troubled." I'm sure she was! But after assuring her that she had "found favour" with God, in other words, God liked her and trusted her and was calling her to take on a mammoth job. The angel tells her that she will have a child, who will be a descendant of David, and would rule over the people of Israel for ever. Mary knew she hadn't slept with any man, so, obviously she wanted to know how this would happen. She would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, the angel says. The angel also gives her proof. Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, who had never been able to have a child, was 6 months pregnant, as had been promised by the visitation to Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband earlier. Mary accepts what she has been asked to do as "the Lord's servant," and prepares herself so that the Lord's word would be fulfilled.

We need to refer back to our Old Testament reading for today. In it, God has told David that he is not to build the temple but one of his son's would do so. Instead, God will give David peace, a place for him and his people to live, and he would make David's name great. He also promises his family would be kings of

the people of Israel for ever. He ends by saying “Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne will be established forever.” We all know the subsequent history of Israel, how through their disobedience, God allowed the Babylonians to conquer them and take them into exile, and they returned by the good graces of the Persian king, and re-established themselves in their homeland, and rebuilt the Temple, and since then their land was conquered by the Greeks, then the Romans, and there has been no sign of a king descended from David ever since. The Jewish people are looking for their messiah who will be a descendant of David, of the house of Judah, and they are awaiting this Messiah to this day.

But the Angel told Mary that the baby she would be carrying would be the “Son of the most high” and that God would give him the throne of his father David. In other words, God is sending his Messiah but not as a conquering king, but as a baby, to a girl not even finally married to a man who himself was the descendant of David. We can be grateful that Mary was a faithful Jewish girl who put her faith absolutely in God, and agreed to give herself over to this.

And God was with her. God persuaded Joseph, another good, faithful Jew, that, in his dream, he was to take Mary and bring up the child as a good father would, so Mary was spared a painful divorce. Mary spent three months with Elizabeth, not only so that these two women who were similarly called by God, could love and support each other and give praise to God together, but possibly so that she would avoid the judgement of her community, and the stoning to death that was the law for any woman falling pregnant by a man not her husband. Hopefully, things would settle down.

Similarly the birth took place in Bethlehem, which would not only fulfil scripture, that the Messiah was to be born there, but it would protect the young mother and her baby from any further negative censure from the community. (remember Jesus was not accepted in Nazareth later, when he came back to preach? That was when he said “a prophet is not without honour save in his own country” Nazareth was like that, apparently!). It was in Bethlehem that the shepherds came to worship him, and possible the Wise men came as well. And with the anger and paranoid jealousy of Herod, and the decree demanding all boy babies in Bethlehem were to be killed, Joseph escaped after being warned in a dream, and took the family to Egypt. They only returned to Nazareth when Jesus was a boy, and by then the little family would be established and they could settle down and live a normal life.

So what can we learn from today’s Gospel? Firstly, we can trust that God’s word is reliable. What God says God will do, God does. However, how God’s will is carried out is entirely up to God. The Messiah coming to earth as a baby is not what was expected. And that messiah was never a soldier as David was, nor a powerful ruler as Solomon was. His life doesn’t make sense for any expectation of a conquering ruler. Instead we get a crucified and risen Saviour, and a Kingdom of heaven.

Secondly, faith in God often means going in blindly. History abounds with people who saw a need but the authorities didn’t allow it. They either had to wait, or they had to do things differently. Even our church history alone, shows this. Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk who wanted to reform the church ended up breaking away from it, eschewing the worst excesses of an unrealistic theology, translating the Bible into the language of his people, and marrying an ex-nun, hence starting the tradition of clergy families and protestant worship. John Wesley who was an Anglican priest whose preaching largely headed Britain away from a revolution similar to that of the French, and went a long way towards combatting the problems of working-class alcoholism, had to preach outside the church. He was not accepted into Anglican pulpits, and his followers established Methodism, a new denomination. William Booth, whose passion for the poor found no response in the Methodist church, saw that he had to leave and he founded the Salvation

Army which still does sterling work amongst the lowest echelons of society. God's will was always done, but not always in a straightforward or obvious way.

Thirdly, God will not call us without some form of assurance. The Angel spoke to Mary about Elizabeth, and when the two met, Elizabeth's baby jumped in her womb, this affirming the nature of Mary's pregnancy once more. Any calling we have will be vindicated somehow. We will then go forward, assured that God is with us.

So where is God leading us, his body, in the year that lies ahead? Has God spoken to us? is God trying to speak to us, but are too afraid of what the message is? Surely in our rather battered country and the struggling and ineffective Christian denominations, God must want to do something. How are we listening, and what are we hearing? Let us kneel before the manger this Christmas and truly adore our Lord and Saviour, and let the small message of hope and restoration that he is putting in our hearts be heard by us all. We are God's church Even if it is struggling to find its way in a new and different world. We are in God's country, although no one needs to be told about the huge almost intractable issues we are facing. Above all, we are in God's world. Let us not, by our littleness and narrow point of view, our fear and anxiety and our hopelessness stop God from working within it. The young Mary had faith, and she carried it through to the end. Let us have faith too, and who knows What God will do?