

Finally we have reached the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent. All but our Christ Candle is lit on our advent wreath, but this year, with Christmas Eve only a few hours away; it is hard to still be in Advent mode and wondering what we might take from this season of reflection- rather I am considering all the things which are left to do, instead of pondering what has been already achieved. Part of the reason for this is I guess is that the last 3 weeks seem like a blur of church services, nativity plays, Christmas parties and drinks and task lists in preparation for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The other reason of course is thinking – but am I ready for tonight and tomorrow? In the midst of all our end of year and Christmas activities, we actually have to get ready for the main event.

In a season however when we are called to watch and wait, God reminds us to stop this morning and to reflect – both on what has been and what is to come. It is too easy to be overwhelmed. But actually Advent is as important as Christmas and both are key components of our faith. I read an article a while ago that suggested that we should endeavour to always be an Advent people. Karoline Lewis<sup>1</sup> who was the author of the article said that she liked the idea of Advent as a way of life, a way of life that seems to resonate with the meaning of incarnation. She reflect that in the Advent themes - we see, we regard, we are perplexed, we question, and we commit to God. In a sense this season sums up the essence of our faith. It is no accident then, that the figure we consider on this last Sunday of Advent is Mary.

Mary is our model, our example, our witness, our sister who voices for us a pattern of Christmas expectancy and Christmas response. She embodies our Christmas feelings, our Christmas questions, our Christmas ponderings, not only in response to the time leading up to Christmas but also in our post-Christmas reality. She is not just a simple girl who said yes – her life of faith, like ours, has much more depth than that.

The reason that Mary can be a model for us in this Advent season and beyond, is that her experience reflects so much our own experiences of faith.

First, we discover that Mary doesn't really do anything. She is favoured. Regarded. The angel Gabriel comes to her. She doesn't seek this encounter out. God seeks her out. Maybe one of our Advent questions should be - would we really, honestly, seek God out given the chance? Or like Mary can we see where God has sought us out?

Second, we learn that Mary is perplexed. No surprise there. At the same time, the only thing Gabriel has said so far is "the Lord is with you." There's been no mention of pregnancy. Rather, simply, the Lord is with you. Let's be honest. Perplexity is exactly our response when the God shows up. To me? Why me? Why now? I think we underestimate the impact of what it means

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=3462>

to know that God is actually around- here in our midst. Perhaps some more perplexity would do us well in our relationship with God!

Third, Mary asks, “how can this be?” Mary not only utters these words for the sake of herself but also for the sake of God. God, really? Is this really what you want to do? Like the prophets, and faithful before her, Mary is not afraid to ask God questions – and nor should we be.

Fourth, Mary makes a commitment. “Here am I.” Like the prophets of old, she commits herself to the God who chooses the unexpected. At the same time, she entrusts herself to a new self, to a willingness to imagine a future beyond her present, to embrace an identity of which she has little knowledge or understanding but to which she willing to commit.

And so we are an Advent people, just like Mary we are seen, we are perplexed, we question, and we commit to God.

But what is God doing? God is transforming the World. God is showing us love in a way that has never been demonstrated before. And God is doing it through us! God transforms the world slowly and painfully because it is changed through our word and actions. So the great moment of the Incarnation – the birth of the Saviour and teacher who is Christ the Lord - could only happen because of that ordinary girl who is regarded, is perplexed, questions and commits! The world can only change now when we do the same thing.

It is so much like that poem from Teresa of Avila we so often quote in this congregation –

*Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

Mary embodies this – as does our ability to be a people, just like Mary we are seen, we are perplexed, we question, and we commit to God. This won't happen without us and it has to happen because the world needs it – desperately and perhaps today more than ever.

The passage from Romans which we heard earlier relates quite directly to this Gospel theme, although subtly<sup>2</sup>. The author declares that the mystery, the divine secret, has now been disclosed for all the world to hear. The coming of Christ into the world was in fulfilment of the divine purpose. It sometimes feels that this message – like the doxology from Romans is too abstract for us to relate to. Why doesn't God just be clear about the actions we need to take?

The challenge in all of this, in the example of Mary – in the confirmation of the doxology – is that God is present – in our midst, as we will see but we don't always recognise it.

During the week, the crown nominations committee announced the name of the new Bishop of London – Bishop Sarah. There has been a lot of strong reaction to the announcement, as well as a great deal of shock. The first senior woman Bishop, an outsider, a priest late to ordination. Bishop Sarah brings with her appointment a new pattern of being. In a number of interviews she has been pushed to respond to the supposed controversy of her appointment – but her answer has always been the same – it is my job to *follow Jesus Christ, to know him and to make him known*<sup>3</sup>. It is a sound message – for this is central to our faith and to Advent.

Sometimes during Advent and Christmas is easy to forget God's centrality amidst all the tinsel! I was struck on Friday however as I came through the city on the bus to look at the Christmas lights – by the large angels floating in lights about Piccadilly and Regents Street. In the middle of this commercial celebration is an image of a herald – God in our midst. The doxology we hear in Romans (that very short passage we heard today), is a summary of the essence of faith – of what happens when we dare to believe that we are seen and regarded by God. The angel lights reminded me that so often we are seen and regarded by God when we think we are looking at something else!

As we come to the end of the season of Advent today, we are at the threshold of our transition to the actual story of the birth of Christ in the Gospel of Luke, acclaimed and praised by the angels and witnessed by the shepherds. We'll join the heavenly host as we celebrate the good news of Christmas. But even as we make the transition to the celebration of Christmas, we will

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2247](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2247)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/18/sarah-mullally-appointed-bishop-of-london-church-of-england>

remain an Advent people as we continually watch and wait for the coming of Christ.

But more importantly we will be an Advent people because we live out the incarnation – that is, we live with Jesus in our midst – just like Mary we are seen, we are perplexed, we question, and we commit to God. Hopefully this means we, like Mary, can be a people of joy – even in our anticipation and with our questions.

*My soul magnifies the Lord,  
And my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour... Amen!*