

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> December 2021**  
**The Fourth Sunday of Advent**

**Collect**

Eternal God,  
as Mary waited for the birth of your Son,  
so we wait for his coming in glory;  
bring us through the birth pangs of this present age  
to see, with her, our great salvation  
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

**Micah 5:2-5a**

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,  
who are one of the little clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to rule in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old,  
from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
when she who is in labour has brought forth;  
then the rest of his kindred shall return  
to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth;  
and he shall be the one of peace.

**Luke 1:39-45**

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said,  
'My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

## Sermon

“Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a practice, that becomes spiritual muscle memory for living through life not as we wish it to be.” I came across these words on Twitter recently, quoted from a retreat address given by Sr. Gemma CJ, a Jesuit nun. And as I read them, I found myself thinking about Mary. Let me just repeat those words again. “Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a practice, that becomes spiritual muscle memory for living through life not as we wish it to be.”

What I love about this observation is that it holds together a tension that lies at the heart of our faith. That the world is not as we would like it to be. That, whether or not we seek to block out international news stories, we live in a world of deep inequalities in which suffering and pain exist alongside luxury. And even in our own daily lives, we recognise that life often isn't “fair”. And this reality is held alongside a faith that is full of hope. That dares to believe that the challenges of this life are not the end of the story.

I want to notice an important distinction between hope and optimism. There are ways in which an optimistic mindset pervades society. If you have been on either side of an interview panel, you will know that jobs are offered to those who can tell a good story about the ways in which everything will improve if they are employed. Often, their evidence comes from a story of transformation that they initiated in their previous workplace. The stories invariably involve overcoming challenges and winning hearts and minds.

I sometimes find myself wondering whether others in the organisation would tell the story the same way. More importantly, though, there are challenges with relentless optimism. Please don't get me wrong, we need people with drive, energy and enthusiasm – sometimes I can even be one of those people myself. But there are ways in which relentless optimism can let us down.

The thing is, it denies the realities of the world as it is. Who would admit in an interview, for example, that they aren't a team player? Yet there are plenty of individuals who work far better alone. I remember receiving advice about how to answer that awkward question when you're asked about something you're not very good at. You have to choose something relatively minor, and if at all possible, make it into a virtue. “Well, I do tend to work just a little bit too hard, but I'm finding ways to look after myself, too.”

As well as denying the realities of the world as it is, optimism can tend to find hope in the wrong place. In a sense the two are connected. The reality of the world is one of beauty and possibility set alongside other instincts. Each one of us is made in God's image, and at our best we are capable of working alongside others, equally made in God's image, yet with different gifts from our own, so that we bring out the best in one another. Yet we don't always respond like that – and neither do other people. In the complexity of the world as it is, we see glimpses of possibility, set alongside the stubborn realities of sin. It is God's kingdom that is in those glimpses; and it is the result of a connectedness to God – the God within us and the God within others. Where optimism fails is in its assumption that we can change the world in our own strength. That if only we try hard enough, or show people how brilliant we are, everything will get better.

What we do undoubtedly matters. The scriptures are full of that truth. Yet it is what we do as human beings made in God's images, in relationship with God and one another, that brings the glimpses of God's kingdom. Transformation comes from God, working through each one of us.

Which brings me back to my opening quote – and to Mary. Let me remind you once again of those words of Sr. Gemma. “Hope, like every virtue, is a choice that becomes a practice, that becomes spiritual muscle memory for living through life not as we wish it to be.” Here we have someone acknowledging explicitly that life is not as we wish it to be. That's not a statement of negativity or pessimism, but simply what we know to be true, whether we turn on the news, listen to a parent in anguish about the behaviour of their child, or recognise the indiscriminate nature of illness.

Yet that truth is no barrier to hope. It may wear down our optimism, but never our hope. And that is where Sr. Gemma's words are equally helpful, because they tell us something about the nature of hope. That it is a virtue; that it is a choice that becomes a practice; and that if we practise enough, it will become instinctive – spiritual muscle memory.

Which is where I think we have a lot to learn from Mary. Each of the gospel writers adds shape to our understanding of Mary, none more so than Luke. It is to Mary that the angel appears, advising her that she is to give birth to God's son. And her response is: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” You may, like me, admire Mary's courage and faith in giving such a wholehearted answer. Yet in that admiration you may also recognise that the instinctiveness of this reaction was probably born of a lifetime of spiritual practice. The kind of practice that Sr. Gemma speaks of.

As we get to know Mary better throughout the gospels, one thing becomes clear. Her faith is not blind. Just think of that moment of encounter with Simeon when she presents Jesus at the Temple. His words to her are: “and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Whether or not she knew it from the start, Mary will grow to understand that she will experience some of the worst that the world has to offer. And yet that does not dull her hope.

When she could have merely been frustrated at the twelve-year-old Jesus, staying behind at the Temple, causing his parents no end of anxiety, instead she “treasured all these things in her heart.” She plays her part in encouraging Jesus towards his own vocation, knowing that he will be the one to produce wine at the wedding in Cana. She accepts almost being sidelined as Jesus recognises that kith and kin stretch beyond blood relatives, and is there at the foot of the cross when her own son is put to death.

Where does Mary find the strength? How does she keep the hope?

I wonder whether the answer is that she practises. Just like us, she practises with other people. The support that she and Elizabeth give to one another is evident from this morning's gospel reading. And the words of her song – the familiar words of the Magnificat – show us what is at the heart of her hope. That while the world is not as we wish it to be, we can still believe in the power of God to transform. Mary holds together the reality of the world as it is, with the promise of the world as it can be by placing her trust in God and saying yes to God's call. Perhaps we might make the choice to do the same. And, in the words of Sr. Gemma, keep on practising.

Amen