

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 20th December 2020
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.

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, 'See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.' Nathan said to the king, 'Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.'

But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?' Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.

Romans 16:25-end

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever! Amen.

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much

perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Sermon

I love to watch the same television programmes over and over again. For someone like me, BBC iPlayer is perfect, because I can find a series that I like; watch every episode; and then watch them again and again. The thing is, I very rarely actually sit down and concentrate on the programmes, which means that new details of the story are revealed to me each time that I watch. And even when I think that I know something back to front and inside out, there will still be a scene that I just haven't observed.

There can be something about the familiarity of the Christmas Bible readings that can prevent us from really observing what is going on. Whereas sometimes on a Sunday we can find ourselves hearing the readings and not recognising them at all, at Christmas, we know the readings so well that we can forget to allow them to speak to us afresh.

So this morning I want us to take some time to really unpack the gospel reading, that familiar story of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary, and ask ourselves what it has to say to each of us – and perhaps also us as a community – today.

Let's start with the opening: "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David." Luke is setting the scene for us. This passage comes after we hear about Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, conceiving in old age, and the sixth month probably refers to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Angels are God's messengers, and we mustn't miss that reminder that Gabriel is doing God's work. He has been sent to Galilee, to a woman engaged to a man of the House of David, which is important because for the scriptures to be fulfilled, the Messiah must come from the House of David. And then, typical of Luke, we hear: "The virgin's name was Mary." Luke is not going to allow this woman to be ignored – she takes centre stage. God's story is for everyone, and most especially for those who feel excluded and marginalised.

I just love Gabriel and Mary's opening exchange. The angel opens with: 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' And we hear: "But (Mary) was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."

It's wonderful, isn't it? Because it actually feels pretty authentic. What would you actually think if someone said to you: "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." Our first thought might be that someone was being sarcastic or mocking us. Why, after all, would this Nazarene virgin consider herself favoured? Why would God be particularly interested in her?

It's a message that we need to hear again and again. That God's favour can rest with the most unlikely people. And that Gabriel's greeting is for each of us, at any moment: "The Lord is with you."

What the angel says next is prefaced with: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God." So often in the New Testament we are told: "Do not be afraid." What makes Mary such an astonishing example to us all is that she really does take it on board. Just look at how the exchange unfolds. Gabriel outlines for Mary what it will mean that she has found favour with God: "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

It is the most extraordinary level of detail for anyone to take in. Yet Mary's only question is how this can happen because she is a virgin. She has been told that she does not need to be afraid, and that she has found favour with God. And she really does believe it. Her only question is to pick up a point of detail – "How?" – which Gabriel clarifies: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'

Gabriel goes further, though, and these are words that we always need to hear. He reminds Mary that her cousin Elizabeth has conceived in her old age, even though everyone assumed she was barren, and he concludes: "For nothing will be impossible with God." It's hard to believe, isn't it? That where God is concerned we need to recognise that our own understanding of what is and isn't possible may need to be extended.

There is little doubt that our gifts of understanding and sense-making are God-given. And we need look no further than the extraordinary work of those making vaccines for Covid 19 this year to see the wonder of human endeavour. Yet we also need to remember that there are limits to our abilities. Those limits keep on being extended, but there will always be things that are not in our power.

The eternal sphere, by contrast, is entirely different. Which is why, when things feel beyond us; when we really don't know which way to turn or what we can possibly do; we can always turn to God. Because, as Gabriel reminds us, the Lord is with us. And with God, nothing will be impossible.

Our reading concludes with Mary saying: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Having sought clarification about how a virgin can conceive, it seems that she has everything she needs, willingly handing herself over to God. I expect that many of us long for a faith as strong and deep as Mary's. Yet she never saw herself as anything extraordinary. What made the difference was her willingness to hear God's word and follow.

And perhaps here it might help us to hear that final sentence: "Then the angel departed from her." I expect that many of us don't necessarily feel that we have heard from God in quite the direct way that Mary did. Yet there are three things that can help us. The first is that Luke wrote this story down so that we can be inspired by God's word, just as Mary was. So that we can believe that ordinary people like you and me can find favour with God. The second is that what mattered was Mary's faith – and that is something that we can all seek to develop through our prayer and worship, spending time in God's presence. And finally, the angel departed from Mary. I rather expect that throughout the rest of her life, she, like us, had times of faith and times of doubt. This was clearly a moment of revelation, yet she was presented with challenges, too.

So I hope, that having spent some time with Gabriel and Mary this morning, we might be inspired to remember God's presence with us; to dare to believe that we, too, might be favoured; and to listen intently to all God may be calling us to, individually and together.

Amen