

19 December 2021; 4th Sunday of Advent
Micah 5: 2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

1. On the brink

Today our daughter and husband have reluctantly told their children aged 11 and 8 that they can't go to their pre-booked Football club Christmas lunch in a ball park. This is a difficult time for us all – what events shall we go to, and in Church, should we hold all of our Christmas services in the usual way? We have had to make decisions about our larger services in both Ashdon and Hadstock, and such discussions are happening across the country in relation to carol services and nativity plays, as well as football matches and office parties.

Such discussions are important, but they can pre-occupy us, and even the lovely carol services and nativity plays themselves can mean that the wonderful events that we celebrate at Christmas are brought forward. We are used to Christmas appearing in our shops from October or November, but even in church, there can be a tendency to get there too quickly! So on this final Sunday of Advent, let us relish this opportunity now to reflect on the lessons that come **before** that marvellous birth.

Our gospel reading portrays Mary at a particular moment in time – not yet a mother, but looking ahead and trying to understand and come to terms both with what has already happened and what is to come. This is both a very ordinary situation and a completely extraordinary one. She is a young girl who has had a vision and agreed to do God's will. She knows it will change her life, but not how. Even the coming birth of an ordinary child fills a first time mother (and even father??) with some of these feelings! At a human level, her mind must have been filled with turmoil – so Luke portrays her making a journey to her older cousin. She has been told that Elizabeth too is to have a child. This visit has a very natural feel to it. The need for companionship and help at such a time is very human, and Mary may well have felt that of all people, Elizabeth will be the one to understand. Perhaps that is why the angel mentioned it? Yet the story as Luke tells it in this passage is about far more than a young frightened pregnant girl looking for support. Mary's reaction and response has many parallels for us in our own spiritual journey.

2. Encounter

The first seven verses are about the meeting with Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's recognition of the significance of what is

happening to and through Mary. This is painted as happening without the need for words – it is the Holy Spirit which leads to recognition both on the part of Elizabeth and even on the part of the unborn child in her womb, who moves at the sound of Mary’s voice. We have a very clear picture here **of the Spirit as the one who helps us to understand what God is about.** Elizabeth’s response is to affirm Mary in her calling.

This seems to me to be the first of the parallels that we can see with our own spiritual journey. Vocation is often presented as if it were an individual matter between me and God. Yet our experience is more complex. Even those who are most certain that they hear and recognise the call of God need affirmation from others. What must it have meant for Mary to have heard her cousin declaring her own awareness of the importance of the child that is to be born? Did she need reassurance? I like to think so. Certainly her own joyful response is portrayed here as **following**, not preceding, Elizabeth’s recognition.

Quite often our own experience is that we think we hear God’s call, and may even respond to it, and are then filled with doubts and fear. This isn’t just in relation to whether to train for ordained ministry– it can be one of those sudden certainties or

feelings that we must get in touch with so and so, or do such and such. It can be the call to come to church week by week, or to to be on the PCC – or even to come off it! Of course, many people are anxious to offer **unthinking** reassurance or condemnation of what we decide to commit our time to. But, like Mary, we need to seek out the company of people who know us well and whom we trust to offer a more thoughtful response.

3. Reflection on our own part in God’s plan

Elizabeth’s words lead Mary into a hymn of praise that is very familiar to us. It is in two parts. Firstly, Mary expresses wonder and incredulity at her own part in God’s plan. Remember that Mary has already given her consent to what God is asking of her. Her obedience is the foundation for all that follows. And here she wonders **not at what she is doing for God, but at what he has done for her in choosing her.**

In imagining this scene, I tend to think that perhaps up to this point Mary has been filled with an apprehension about what she has taken on. Now – maybe for the first time – Elizabeth’s recognition of the importance of what is going on leads her to see her part in it all as **an honour, not a burden.** And so it is.

There is a sense of being part of something much bigger, of being part of God's plan. And with this, the anxieties about details (and for Mary, they were pretty big details!) pass away. Alongside the recognition of the importance of what is happening to her, there is a sense of **her own unworthiness**. In my own experience, this sequence is a common one.

4. Praise of God

This wonder at her own part in God's plans leads Mary to wonder in a more general sense, and to reflect on the very nature of God - a radical God, who will change the ways of the world. Here she looks to the future kingdom of God, drawing on words from her own religious tradition – those of Hannah at the predicted birth of Samuel, one of the great prophets whom we have recalled in our Advent wreath.

5. Participation

Yet I started by describing Mary as **participant** as well as **prophet**. Whilst her words here are of the future, her situation as a pregnant woman is a present reality. She does not know what her participation will mean, beyond the fact that life will never now be the same. At the heart of the Christmas story is the birth of a baby. New life is always awesome in part because

contains so much promise but no guarantees. It is totally unpredictable.

Our journey as Christians is not so different to that of the pregnant Mary. We are committed, but do not know what lies ahead. Will these church communities survive another generation? Is the love and care you all lavish on them worth it? We do not know, but we keep on giving of our time, of ourselves, responding to the sense of call that each of us has. All we can do is trust in God, that he will fulfil his promises, in and through us and through those who hear his voice and follow his ways. So on this final Sunday of Advent, before we are overtaken by the birth of the baby, let us offer Him our apprehension, our uncertainties about the future (our own futures and that of our churches) and our willingness to do his will, whatever the consequences, but confident in his strength and guidance. **Amen**