

Sunday, 20th December 2020 – online service

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

almanac.oremus.org/2020-12-20

Principal Service

2 Samuel 7.1-11,16

Canticle: Magnificat or

Psalm 89.1-4,19-26*

Romans 16.25-27

Luke 1.26-38

Here we are: four candles have been lit on the advent wreath and Christmas day is only four full days away. Of course, it will be different from other Christmases that we have had.

For some the coming days may well be tinged with sadness, unable to be with family and friends, having to make a choice of who to visit and who to leave out. For those with families abroad it is impossible this year to go and see them. Certainly my plans for being in Germany with my mother and brother and his family have been scuppered and for the first time in 15 years I will be at home in Chilton.

For some the current restrictions on how many people you can meet with over the festive period will come as a relief. Not everyone enjoys all of their relatives and this year, there is for once a very good reason not to invite some and thus have a very valid excuse to avoid some people. No need to grit your teeth and put on a friendly smile, best behaviour and great effort to be the affable son-in-law or daughter-in-law, brother or sister, cousin, niece or nephew or whatever relation.

No matter which camp you are in, those saddened by separation from family members or those secretly rejoicing about not having to socialise, this year is the chance of engaging with the Christmas story in a deeper and perhaps more meaningful way than before. There may be more time available and it gives us the opportunity of reading and thinking about what Christmas is all about.

Our reading today is taken from Luke 1, the story of the annunciation. It is an account which is driven by hindsight, looking back after the most significant event in history to its beginnings. What really matters in Christianity, what makes Christianity is Easter. The risen Christ, the resurrection is what it is all about. The early Christians were in no doubt about this. Paul does not mention anything else with regards to Jesus but concentrates fully on the risen Christ. There are no childhood stories about Jesus in any of Paul's letters, the circumstances of His birth are not mentioned. Paul emphasizes the resurrection and its effects and consequences for all of humanity. In the same way, the earliest gospel, that published under the name of Mark, does not have a birth story but builds up almost from the beginning to the crucifixion.

The figure of Mary only emerged towards the end of the 1st century. Christians looking back from the all important Easter were beginning to ask and to find answers to the question of where it all began. It is only in the later gospels, those accredited to Matthew and Luke that we do get accounts of the birth story, have some glimpses of Jesus' childhood, get to know his parents and find mention of other family members.

The theologian Walter Grundmann¹ points out that the whole New Testament apart from Luke 1 does not mention the concept of a virgin birth. Instead, the prevailing thinking was a pre-existence Christology as shown in Mark and John. John repeatedly mentions Joseph as the father of Jesus. The idea of a virgin birth was shaped by Hellenistic thinking which in turn links back to Egyptian origins, where it is told that the god Amon produced a divine son with the queen. This concept was transferred to Jesus by Hellenistic inspired Jewish Christians and Grundmann points to the Qumran scriptures which make such a way of thinking probable. The intention of the writers of Luke's Gospel was to show that Jesus is more than John, to present a way in which to trump John's conception by a hitherto infertile woman. The Jewish Messiah is always expected to be conceived naturally. Thus Luke's account is seen just as an illustration of an idea and not meant to be taken as fact. The early Christian not only saw Jesus as one promised in the Old Testament scriptures but also as the fulfilment of the myths of an eternal ruler of the world which were held by various peoples.

Tom Wright² in contrast points out that a virgin birth is in theory scientifically possible. There is BBC article³ from 2014 which gives evidence of virgin births occurring in nature, mentioning snakes, lizzards, sharks and turkeys. Wright concedes, though, that the account given in Luke would only convince those who are already to a certain extent open to the idea that Jesus "was also the one in whom Israel's God had made his personal appearance on the stage of history." Wright also continues to say that the way he was conceived is not the most important thing about Jesus but that death and resurrection are far more significant, as also demonstrated in the writings of Paul. For Wright the story of the virgin birth carries a "sense of appropriateness, hard to define, easy to recognize ... It isn't what we would have expected, but it somehow rings true."

For another approach to the whole Christmas story, have a look at the documentary produced by Dr. Robert Beckford⁴ who also points out the cultural influences which shaped the Biblical story.

Our reading from Luke 1, no matter how you want to take it, literally or figuratively, metaphorically points out that Jesus is special. It is made clear that Jesus is more than John the Baptist. There are many parallels between the announcement of John's birth and that of Jesus, but each of them ends in showing that Jesus is more.

Mary is shown as the opposite to Zachariah. He doubts the angel's message and needs to be convinced. A special sign is given to him. Mary in contrast, simply believes. She surrenders to God, submits and accepts. In that way, Mary is a good role-model for all Christians, whether women or men.

We do not know why God chose Mary, why she is the one who found special favour. It is not mentioned that she was particularly pious, believing or of exceptional moral virtue. She is a young peasant woman, actually more of a girl than a woman, a teenager as we would say nowadays. And yet, Mary has a deep, life-changing religious experience.

What we can learn is that God can choose anyone. God does not look at people like we do. Think of the Old Testament reading from 2 Samuel which features King David. He was one of those unlikely choices made by God, since God does not at the status of people, their exterior but their interior.

Mary had one character trait that made her the obvious choice: obedience, submission, unquestioning faith in the words of the angel. She does not really argue, does not refuse to co-

¹ Grundmann, W. (1981) *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt

² Wright, NT (2001) *Luke for Everyone*, London: SPCK

³ <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20141219-spectacular-real-virgin-births>

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fj-jYyx3o_k

operate but faithfully trusts: ***“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.”*** We can learn from Mary what it means to be obedient.

When we read beyond the passage we have heard we come to the scene where Mary visits her elderly relative Elizabeth. Here the pregnant teenager meets someone who is to give birth for the first time late in life – they could not be more different. It is interesting with how much respect Elizabeth greets the younger and also how confident Mary is. The experience of meeting with the angel, a deep, most significant religious experience, has given her a new outlook. She is praising God and also challenging the status quo. Her words in the “Song of Mary” or “Magnificat” as it is called because of the first word in the Latin translation show how the existing society can be challenged. There is talk of the lowly being raised and the mighty put down. The normal order of things does not have to continue. There is another option. Life on earth, in this world, can be different. There is no need for injustice to prevail. Why? Because meeting with God gives people strength and confidence to stand up for the greater justice that God intends.

When we look at the rest of the so-called gospel according to Luke, we see that Mary does not remain the central figure. We encounter her in a few places, but the story is taken over quite rightly by Jesus, his words, teachings and actions. We see Mary on Good Friday in sorrow but the spotlight is on the resurrection and various encounters people have with the risen Christ. Even though Mary had this deep and life-changing religious experience, the encounter with the angel, she is not in the centre of the gospel. It is not a story of good news because of Mary but because of Jesus. What we can learn here is not to put ourselves into the centre of attention. We are meant to witness to the power of God as revealed in Christ. We don’t preach our own experiences but proclaim the gospel. We need to step back into the shadows, make space for Christ.

This Christmas, as mentioned at the beginning, is going to be different from all others, beloved traditions and rituals may be missing, but let us take the chance to engage with the Christmas story, to look at the example of Mary and turn to Christ, submitting, surrendering to God. Let us take inspiration from Mary and ask God for a real encounter with him, so that we come to believe in God and not simply believe that certain things happened.