

Advent 4 – 19 December 2021

Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

Slide 1 This slide shows a carving done by a close friend and given to us many years ago. He was the Governor of Wormwood Scrubs at the time. Sadly he died over 20 years ago but we have this carving to remind us of him. It brings together Mary, the mother of Jesus together with the Cross that Jesus died on. We know that he rose from the dead and that He will come again and for those who believe there is eternal life. We have this on the wall as we enter our sitting room, and it is a constant reminder of Mary as the mother of Jesus and of Elizabeth's words "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her"!

We have come to the 4th Sunday in Advent. Advent comes from the Latin word meaning "coming". I wonder how we have used these weeks in Advent? How have we responded to the call that God is making to our hearts for repentance? To turning our back on those things that are not right in our lives and turning to God through Jesus, so that he can renew us, give us his grace and show us the depths of his love? For us all it should be a time of expectant waiting and preparation for celebrating the birth of Jesus & also for the return of Jesus at the second coming.

I've been looking at some of Tom Wright's reflections on Luke and he asks the question, what would make you celebrate wildly, without inhibition?

Today, in our readings, we have two examples of people who were faithful to what God wanted for them in their lives. They tried to live their lives according to what he wanted, even though it was not easy for them.

Mary and Elizabeth were both faithful worshippers in the Jewish faith. *Slide 2* They both knew their scriptures, they prayed to God and we know of course that Elizabeth's husband Zechariah, who was a priest, met with an angel while offering sacrifices in the temple. The angel had told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth were to have a son and that he would be great in the sight of the Lord. He would be calling all people to repentance, to call people back to God and to make ready for the coming of the Lord. Zechariah, who was struck dumb until John was born, would have written some of these words down so that Elizabeth knew what was happening. These people were trying to follow God's will, to understand what he was saying to them and to his people, the nation of Israel – Mary and Elizabeth knew their scriptures, they knew their psalms. They took time to be with God and to listen to what He was saying to them.

Slide 3 Mary and Elizabeth, together with their fellow Jews, shared a dream that one day all that the prophets had promised would come true. One day that God would do what he had said to their earliest ancestors. From Genesis 12 - All nations will be blessed through Abraham's family. The scriptures that Mary and Elizabeth knew so well, spoke of mercy, hope, fulfilment, reversal, revolution, victory over evil and of God coming to the rescue at last.

As Mary and Elizabeth met and John leapt in Elizabeth's womb, the two pregnant women realised that something special was happening and Mary bursts into this wonderful song with which we are all so familiar.

Slide 4 In this song are words from the scriptures that she would have known since being a child. God has a plan for the world. He uses people in this plan. Our OT reading is already foretelling what God intends to do.

Slide 5 "(But you Bethlehem of Ephrathah who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth one who is to rule Israel... and they shall live secure." From our readings today we have a view of God's plan that is spread over many hundreds of years. God patiently prepares the way for his Son, the Son who will save the world and reveal God to those on earth. Micah picks up on Bethlehem – Micah will think that that prophecy has been fulfilled in David the great King of Israel. But the prophecy indicates that Bethlehem's task is not yet over.

As we know there is more to come. Jesus came to this earth and sometimes it is difficult for us to realise how many steps there were before that happened.

Slide 6 The story of God's people in the OT – the way in which Elizabeth accepted her role as mother of John, the way in which Mary accepted the disgrace and humiliation of a pregnancy out of wedlock, the list is long and we probably don't know a lot of the links in God's plan. If people do not do as he wants, if they reject his call on their lives, if they brake the links in the chain that God intended then he waits patiently until the time is right and the link can be mended again. God is never thwarted, and still does wait patiently.

Slide 7 As I was preparing this sermon, I couldn't help thinking about events surrounding the Covid crisis. It all seems very challenging, not everyone agreeing on the way forward, even in our own country. Wondering, which way next, and concern about the decisions being taken. God has a purpose for his people, but it isn't always straightforward. Things don't always work out the way we expect. Many scholars agree that the history recorded in the OT began over 2000 years before Christ. We see in the OT prophets who spoke God's word, but often did not see the prophesy come true. The last prophet in the OT was around 400 years before John the Baptist appeared. God's chosen people had been waiting for God to fulfil his promise.

Slide 8 In Advent we are thinking about the second coming of Christ. It is a time of expectation as well as preparation. The readings challenge us to confront the theme of divine judgement, but we should be looking forward with expectation. We have a place in God's plan. It may well be small, but we should accept our place in God's great and purposive chain of salvation. We should make sure that the link that we are meant to provide is strong and that we do what God asks of us, even though it may be very difficult. When we fully realise that each one of us has a place in God's plan then we can dance for joy as Mary did and we can thank God for the privilege of being used in his plan.

As we worship together on this last Sunday in Advent, each one of us has a choice. We can refuse to see God's sign. The sign of the birth of baby Jesus. "God with us". Do we wish to recognise that sign or do we wish to step out of the story and go our own way? Would we prefer someone else to carry on the story, someone who is not afraid to take a risk and trust in God.

Or maybe this morning we could be like Elizabeth and Mary, wanting to follow the way in which God is leading us despite what we fear the consequences may be. *Slide 9* Let us hear God's call to us, knowing that Jesus Christ will be coming again to be our judge. Knowing that in our heart of hearts we want to be with that baby in the manger, born as the Son of God, and that we want to help the world around us to see the sign that God has given us – a son born of a virgin who is called "Immanuel" – God with us.

Slide 10 Elizabeth and Mary were people who knew that there was a God. They were so in tune with God's purposes that they were prepared to risk their reputation to allow God to act. Is God showing you and me a sign of something that he wants us to do? Are we ignoring that sign, because we do not want our life to be changed? Or are we prepared to welcome that sign, and to follow it with all the risks that are involved.

The way we know that God is with us is by accepting all that he has to offer us, risking our lives, our reputations when we hear his word spoken, by trusting his promise and believing that he knows best!

We have six days before Christmas when we can meditate on God's purpose for our lives and then we can rejoice as we celebrate the fact that Jesus Christ came to this earth as a baby in order to live a perfect human existence and to give his life that we might obtain eternal life through him. What a celebration!