



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 24th December 2023

Readings: *II Samuel 7.1-11 and 16; Luke 1.68-79 - Benedictus; Romans 16.25-27; Luke 1.26-38*

Advent IV: Christmas Eve

A king who's told the Lord will give his nation a safe place and who will never withhold the divine steadfast love. A girl on the threshold of maturity who finds herself arrested by God in ways which at best seem absurd, and at worst can seem abusive. A priest struck dumb because he was so puzzled by an angel's ludicrous message about the son he thought he and his wife were way too old to have. What are we to make of these characters in Advent 2023?

In King David's reign, we might find disturbing intimations from three millennia ago of the conflict that's still wreaking such havoc in the Middle East, such tragedy as complementary nations both seek a safe place. As that situation threatens the world's equilibrium, this sense of how long the questions have remained unanswered may just leave us fatalistically shrugging our shoulders and saying, 'Twas ever thus.' Or worse, maybe we despair that the world is 'going to hell in a handcart'.

Which is why we need to take Mary seriously, as she helps us discover that serving God's purposes holds in tension a trusting obedience with a radical sense of God's determination that everything be turned back up the right way.

In a world such as this, we need a priest such as Zechariah, with visions of freedom, of peace and of shadows supplanted by shining dawn, and who 'guides our feet in pathways where his peace is ever near'.

A king, a girl, a priest. Advent is about waiting. This Advent, I have been struck as rarely before, by the feeling deep in my gut that we really are waiting for something. The state of the world – I need not detail it - simply cannot be what God intends.

Perhaps we try to persuade ourselves that every other generation has known such seasons, so we should grin and bear it until we come out the other side. But no, I will not accept that. Just because 'twas ever thus' doesn't mean 'should ever be', with those not immediately caught up in it carrying on as if all is well, and those trapped in the middle of it condemned to a living death.

Advent doesn't support such an approach. It wants to arrest us just as it arrested Mary. And my point? That the Advent hope is rooted in that heady mix of our trusting God, expressed in our worship, and our joining in with God's saving work, expressed in our good works. The Christian response to the state of the world neither leaves it all up to God nor assumes it's all down to us. For the thinking Christian the challenge and the opportunity is to find the way of answering God's approach to the world with our approach to the issues of our day.

And if our Advent and Christmas as individuals will be focussed somewhere other than the state of the world, my sense is that the same hope is held out to us, too. If we are worried about someone we love, if we are in a jail run by His Majesty's Prison Service, or imprisoned in depression, if in 2023 we did something or omitted to do something that we now regret, or if we are fearful of what 2024 will bring to us and our circle, well, still ...

... the message of Advent, seeks to feed our faith that God is God, that God will no more take away steadfast love from us than from King David. Advent people are people of resilient trust in that One who is Source, Guide and Goal of all that is. ¹

At the same time, with Mary, we live out that trust by being available as instruments of God's steadfast love wherever we are. In the hymn we will sing shortly, Alan Gaunt helps us recognise

¹ Romans 11.36 (New English Bible)

that 'love ... conceives the Word in us'.² Put right with God through the living, dying, and rising of Christ, we are then beckoned into striving with God for putting right the world. Like Mary, we, too, will be 'swept before God's mighty gale', irresistibly, unrelentingly, to challenge those who abuse their power, to lift up those who are ground down, and to 'fill the starving with good things'³, for whatever it is they hunger.

That is the active waiting of Advent. As our final hymn will have us sing:

Surely he cometh, and the earth rejoices,
glad in his coming who hath sworn: I come!
This hath he done, and shall we not adore him?
This shall he do, and can we still despair?
Come, let us quickly fling ourselves before him,
cast at his feet the burden of our care.⁴

And so it is that we can give thanks to God, the one who came, who is with us, and who will come again. Amen

N. P. Uden

24th December 2023

² from the hymn, *When Mary, like a ship in sail* by Alan Gaunt (1935-2023) (C) 1997 Stainer and Bell

³ Luke 1.22, Jerusalem Bible

⁴ from the hymn *Hark what a sound, and too divine for hearing*, by F. W. H. Myers (1843-1901) RS 660.3