**30th November 2014 Advent Sunday**

**Luke 1.26-38**

"Father Christmas asked my daughter if she wanted the ripped present or squashed one"; "the elf who is meant to be Simon Cowell is completely pointless" - two of the comments from dissatisfied customers which led to a Christmas "wonderland" being closed down temporarily this week. The Magical Journey, near Sutton Coldfield is an attraction - designed with the help of TV decorator Laurence Llewelyn Bowen. It was forced to close after customers took to social media to complain that it was a "rip-off" and "unfinished". It's since reopened.

Black Friday happened a couple of days ago. Police were called out to a number of superstores because crowds were getting factitious with each other fighting for the bargains. Greater Manchester Police appealed for calm after attending seven Tesco shops, at which three men were arrested and a woman was hit by a falling television.

The force's chief constable called the issues "totally predictable" .Sgt Paul Marshall, a Metropolitan Police officer, [**tweeted**](https://twitter.com/MPSSurbitonHSgt/status/538258853541191680): "Even on #BlackFriday shoving people to the floor so you can get £20 off a Coffee Maker is still an assault."

Ahh Christmas – the madness begins. We are all looking for savings. But we need saving don’t we?

The prophets were begging for God to act. Isaiah in our passage for today in chapter 64 asks God

*‘Why did you not tear asunder the heavens and comedown, that when you appeared the mountains might shake, that the fire might blaze in brushwood when it makes the water boil. …. We all become like something unclean and all our righteous deeds were like a filthy rag… there is no one who invokes your name or rouses himself to hold fast to you for you have hidden your face from us and left us in the grip of our inequities… will you stand aloof Lord and keep silent?’*

Well Advent is about longing and hoping for a Saviour, for God to act. Christmas is of course a celebration of God acing, taking flesh, entering our existence, showing up, full of grace and truth, revealing light in our darkness – our darkness over whether God is there, whether God does care, what type of God is there in the first place.

But all of that still needs our co-operation. Our obedience. The angel Gabriel came with a request to Mary. God, it seems, needed humanity’s co-operation to bring a plan of salvation together.

The angel appears and says ‘greetings, most favoured one. The Lord is with you!’ Let me tell that if I arrived on your doorstep and said that, you would immediately reply: ‘what do you want?’

No wonder Mary is ‘deeply troubled’

Maybe I should try it. They say a bit of flattery gets you places. We desperately need people to be involved in the upkeep of these extensive buildings of ours. No matter what small amount of time you can give, if you can give it we’d like to hear from you. Maybe I should start asking people ‘you are most favoured, God wants to bless you by giving you the opportunity to work on his house, to take care of his temple; you have been blessed. How can you say NO?

Of course the angel gave Mary an opportunity to participate in the great work of God. It wasn’t just giving birth. It was giving birth to a child who would be the saviour of the world. Giving birth to a baby is one thing: giving birth to a baby who would go on to make a difference transformed her understanding of the task being required of her.

If Advent is about hope , it is in a way a hope that all that we do for God may not be in vain but will be used by God in His work and plan of salvation. Even if it is painting walls in the church or knocking nails in for a shelf those small tasks are taken up in a greater purpose. If you have a big mouth like me, you can preach, possibly inspire people or challenge people or communicate something of God’s love – or maybe send people to sleep. But I guess that most of the real ministry in this church goes on over coffee at the end of the service – in which case those wonderful people who prepare and serve refreshment at the end of the service also have a vital role to play in God’s economy. Likewise making sure we have safe comfortable buildings to meet in is a vital ministry – so please consider it.

Some people do though feel more ‘favoured’ than others. Some feel that others are more blessed than they are, some feel more burdened than others. Is God not fair? Is God arbitrary?

We pondered on that question at the Credo conversation on Thursday night. I quoted from John Pritchard, the Bishop of Oxford’s book: Ten: Why Christianity makes sense’. He writes; ‘is the sun arbitrary? That’s not hard to answer, but it’s what some people would say of God, that his favour is distributed casually and unfairly; that he answers prayer in an inscrutable way, healing some and ignoring others. We loudly proclaim our ‘God incidences, while every headstone is a symbol of unanswered prayer. I’ve prayed at the same time for people with similar diseases where one has died and the other lived. And we haven’t begun to quantify the vast disport between being born into a middle class western family and being born into a family barley scraping a living on the edges of the African desert.

So is the sun arbitrary ? No – but the effect of the sun is determined by many other factors, such as whether it’s summer or winter, whether we are indoors or outdoors, under a reef or on a beach, in the arctic of in the equator and so on. The human condition is affected by a huge number of factors, not just the goodness of God.

The angel sees Mary deeply troubled and replies by telling her ‘not to be afraid’ for God has been gracious to her…’

We do have a number of clichés which on closer inspection do need challenging. ‘There but for the grace of God go I’ is one of them. It is an understandable reaction based on relief and a desire to stand alongside the one who is suffering. The intended message is ‘I’m no better than you; it could have been me’. Unfortunately the saying gives the impression that you are somehow favoured and protected from the bad event, whereas the person concerned has been left outside God’s grace. God as chosen me, not you.

The idea that God has favourites is problematic. Jesus picked up anybody and everybody to receive mercy, the only criterion being their need. Mary is favoured here, in the sense that she has been chosen for a certain task. She is not loved more than anyone else. God loves the world – but chooses certain people to do certain things – but that doesn’t mean they are any more special than anyone else and that the rest are ‘plebs’.

Mary is told ‘not to be afraid’. We know the end story – we know that Mary does become very afraid – her life is at risk on a number of occasions – whether by King Herod, or Roman Procurators or Religious Pharisees wanting to persecute and crucify her son. I’m sure she was afraid and troubled on many occasions. She did not live a stress free existence.

To say ‘God is in control’ is perhaps another cliché that needs nuance. The agonies of human existence raise objection to this statement. We are afraid because we don’t know what will happen. We don’t know whether things will be OK. We don’t know if the stars will fall from the sky and the moon will turn red. God in one sense does not control the universe. He created it and sustains it but he doesn’t pull all the levers or operates the control switches on everything that happens. Such a God would have given us life in its worst form, with all the promise and none of the freedom. If we couldn’t make our decisions and determine our own destiny there would be no love, no courage, no mercy, no compassion, no success, no failure, indeed nothing of true human value. If I fall of a bike I need to know that it has painful implications, not that I might bounce back like a rubber ball.

The philosopher John Macmurray says the maxim of illusory religion declares: ‘Fear not; trust in God and he will see that none of these things will ever happen to you’.

The maxim of real religion he suggests should be ‘fear not; the things you are afraid of may happen to you – but they are nothing to be afraid of’.

Is God a divine Santa Claus – just there to give us nice gifts – and if we turn up at the Black Friday sales and the gifts have all gone – we are not interested and get grumpy? It is not for nothing that the greatest gift of God is what happened on Good Friday – not Black Friday. Jesus death on the cross declares that whatever happens to us, sin, evil, suffering and death – won’t be the last word – there is redemption - therefore fear not.

And remember we have the presence of God with us – ‘the Lord will be with you’ the angel said to Mary. Gabriel said ‘with God all things are possible’ – a timely reminder that we have the unfathomable possibilities of prayer as well. As we pray, so John Pritchard writes – ‘we enlarge the space for God to be able to act, and when Love is released we can never know its limits’.

In the old, old story Mary, after being initially deeply troubled by the news the angel brings her that she will give birth to the Son of God – eventually says ‘I am the Lord’s servant – may it be as you have said’

She is initially troubled at the prospect of her role in the big play - but eventually finds her part.

Sometimes in life we have to say ‘no’ to certain things in order to find where God wants us to be. Sometimes we need to be deeply troubled and think through situations in order to find our true selves, what makes us tick, where God will bless us.

When I look back at the last year I can think of so many people in this church who have tried new things, offered themselves in service or leadership. We can only do as a church what we are prepared to do as a church and this last year has been a very memorable one and thank you for all your efforts. Some of you may have felt like Mary – ‘why me – I am deeply troubled – why did I get picked for this!’ Maybe sometimes you need to say no in order to be free to try something different. Maybe some of you said no when you should have said yes.

It is worth remembering that Mary seems to have been a quite insignificant character until this event. In an age which over celebrates celebrity, when our young people aspire to be not a good person, or someone who can make a positive difference to our community, but instead aspire to be a ‘celebrity’ it is important to remember that even the people we look up to or who are in our headlines were once insignificant. And we live in a world where many are written off rather too readily, and many people think they are useless.

End of term school reports are out. Consider this school report: ‘he is a constant trouble to everyone, and is always in some trouble or another… he is so regular in his irregularities I do not know what to do’. This was written of Winston Churchill. Remember too, that twelve publishers rejected a single mother’s book about a would-be wizard called Harry Potter. And it was once said of David Beckham, ‘don’t think he’s a great player. He can’t kick with his left foot, he doesn’t score many goals, he can’t head a ball and he can’t tackle. Apart from that he’s alright’. Nobody is too insignificant or beyond use, especially for God, who calls people not to fame and fortune, but to a willingness to serve others.

*Richard Rohr, the Catholic theologian said (in* Jesus’ Plan for a New World)

Our ordinary lives are given an extraordinary significance when we accept that our lives are about something much larger, our pain is a participation in the redemptive suffering of God, and our creativity is the very passion of God for the world. No longer do we need to self-validate, self-congratulate or self-doubt – our place in the cosmos is assured. I do not need to be the whole play or even understand the full script. It is enough to know that I have been chosen to be one actor on the stage. I need only play my part as well as I can.”

The deep Christmas message is that we are loved. God is with us. We are loved – we don’t need to desperately self-congratulate, self-validate – strive to be somebody – to be gifted or famous – as a way of being affirmed and adored and loved. We are loved. God is with us. So go out and enjoy yourself and find true freedom in serving Christ.

Maybe we are not sure that God is with us. The Christmas story may sum up the Christian faith to you – a children’s story with little truth and relevance for today. Last Christmas the Archbishop of Canterbury was interviewed on Radio Five with the comedian Ricky Gervais who was trying to dismiss much of the nativity story. To his surprise the Archbishop agreed on many fronts. He commented that we have allowed the mystery of the incarnation to be contained in a nativity of stereotyped characters rather than allowing it to be the history changing event that Christ’s birth is. Faith can be made mundane and somehow loses its power. That’s when you need to get out of the box you find yourself in. Discover God afresh. If the baby born in Bethlehem was the Son of God – nothing matters more. He is the best present – in the entire world!! And we are the favoured ones – because we get it! But good presents are ones you can share

The Christmas story does sum up the Christian faith in a marvellous and imaginative way. It’s like an overture to the rest of the gospel. God: choosing insignificant people to play their part. God: working through people’s disgrace and troubles to bring new hope. God with us.

May you know that God is with you this Advent and Christmas time.

*Refs:*

*John Pritchard, ‘Ten : why Christianity makes Sense’ pub SPCK 2014*

*John Macmurray quoted by M Percy in Reflections for Daily Prayer CHP 2012*