

A Reflection from Revd Ali for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

Our two readings for today emphasise the paradox that is Advent. The reading from Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 16: 25 – end), is informed by the truth of the *whole* of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul talks of the Christ whose coming was foretold by the prophets – those faithful people who had come so close to God, and God had come so close to them, that they knew what God wanted them to tell others in God's name. Paul talks of the revelation of the promises of God to the faithful people of God. The revelation that is Christ Jesus; the revelation that was for *all* people not just for Israel. Paul's writing was informed by a deep knowledge of the story of God. He had an extensive knowledge of Israel's history and the action of God within that history. But he was also writing from a personal and experiential perspective. Paul had come close to the Messiah during his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road.

Then we have our Gospel reading (Luke 1: 26 – 38). Luke tells us the story of the annunciation in a way that encourages us to enter into the encounter, between a young teenage girl and one of God's archangels. We are witnesses through the Gospel, of a moment when humanity's history was changed forever. A pivotal moment. When that young woman, on the brink of an ordinary and inconsequential married life, said 'yes' to God. And in that moment, everything changed.

So, we have the historical account of the people of God and their journey with God, bound up with the contemporaneous account of that pivotal moment in our history; read in the knowledge of the revelation of the Messiah. All united with the longed for promise of Jesus' return. This is the paradox of Christian faith. We live in the now and the not yet. The knowledge of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but also the anticipation of Jesus' second coming, that will herald the new heaven and the new earth. We hold all those things in tension in our faithful worship of the glorious Trinity, as the liturgical year turns again to bring us close to the mystery that is Christmas.

My temptation, at this time of year, is to focus on the annunciation and the impact it was to have on all of our lives. But our reading from Paul reminds us that we have to listen to the historical voices as well. To remember that the annunciation was part of God's plan that had been in motion for generations. For the last few weeks, in the lectionary cycle of daily prayer, we have been revisiting the prophecies of Isaiah. Snippets of the book of Isaiah pepper our Advent readings, to remind us of the whole history of God's interaction with God's creation.

Writing at a time when the people of God were exiled in Babylon, Isaiah tells of God's future plans for the people of God. That, the time of exile and devastation would not be permanent. There was hope for the future. Isaiah told the people of God that the promised one, the one who would change everything, would come and bring light and life to the whole world. Isaiah is very specific. He tells us that the promised one would come from the house of David. King David was momentous in the history of the people of God, but the one to come would be even greater than his antecedent David.

Part of David's story was that he wanted to create a permanent home for the Lord; a great and holy temple to house the ark of the covenant. But that wasn't part of God's plan for David's life and legacy. The prophet Nathan tells David that the seeming permanence of the grand building that David proposed, is nothing compared to the real permanence of the eternally present God. God is not tethered to a building. God cannot be contained within a human construction. Instead, through the prophet, God reveals God's plans for an everlasting kingdom. An everlasting kingdom that would come from the House of David and would spread throughout the world. David's legacy would not be of bricks and mortar, but from his lineage would come the Messiah. When the rule of the monarchy in Israel and Judah collapsed, the people of God's understanding of the Messiah was less about a worldly ruling power and more of a priestly kind of kingship that would bring worldwide blessing and hope.

We fast forward nearly 30 generations to when Gabriel visited Mary. The angel brings the message that Mary's son will reign on the throne of his ancestor David, and that *his* kingdom will have no end.

The message is the culmination of all the hopes and longings of the generations since David. Gabriel tells Mary that through her, all those hopes and longings can be realised and will bring salvation to the whole world, not just to Israel.

Mary's child, Jesus, will be the fulfilment of the promise made to David. Jesus will be the physical incarnation of God's faithfulness to the promises made to the people of God. Mary is, unsurprisingly, astonished. Not only is she in the presence of an angel, God's herald. But the angel has just told her that she will be the bearer of the Messiah, the one in whom all the hopes and dreams of God's people will be realised. Mary knew that it would be impossible for her to give birth to a child as she is a virgin. So, not unreasonably, she asks for an explanation. Her question is not only an expression of amazement at the impossibility of what is to happen, but perhaps also held an expression of alarm. After all, Mary would have been very cognisant of the custom and laws of Israel. An unmarried pregnant woman could be condemned to death by stoning. Mary had just been told that she would not just have to bear the stigma of her condition, but also the possibility of condemnation because of her pregnancy. The angel doesn't answer her question directly. But cites the example of her cousin Elizabeth, who is 6 months pregnant, even though she was thought to be infertile. Elizabeth's pregnancy was a gift from God, and was also part of God's plan. The angel reassures Mary that she is not alone, even though her situation is unique. Her story will be entwined with Elizabeth's, as their children's lives will also be entwined. Mary then, in faithfulness and humility, accepts God's will for her life and said "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled."

God's plan for humanity was achieved through a faithful teenage girl. Mary's ordinary life was interrupted by the angel, with the extraordinary news that God had chosen her to do something incredible. That ordinary girl was transformed by God's extraordinary grace and love to achieve the seemingly impossible. To give birth to Godself. To bring life to the Incarnation. To deliver the Saviour of the World. Mary said yes!

Mary was faithful and trusted in God to achieve the impossible. She didn't know what was to come, but she trusted in God's grace to transform the ordinary into the extra-ordinary.

So, what about us? What would happen if we were all prepared to say 'yes' to God? To trust in the extraordinary, transformational love of God at work in the world. Can we offer our ordinary lives in God's service, and allow the God of love to transform our lives into something extraordinary? To be faithful to God's call on our lives. To live our lives in the service of God and each other? If we all said 'yes', then perhaps we too, would find that nothing is impossible with God.

Amen